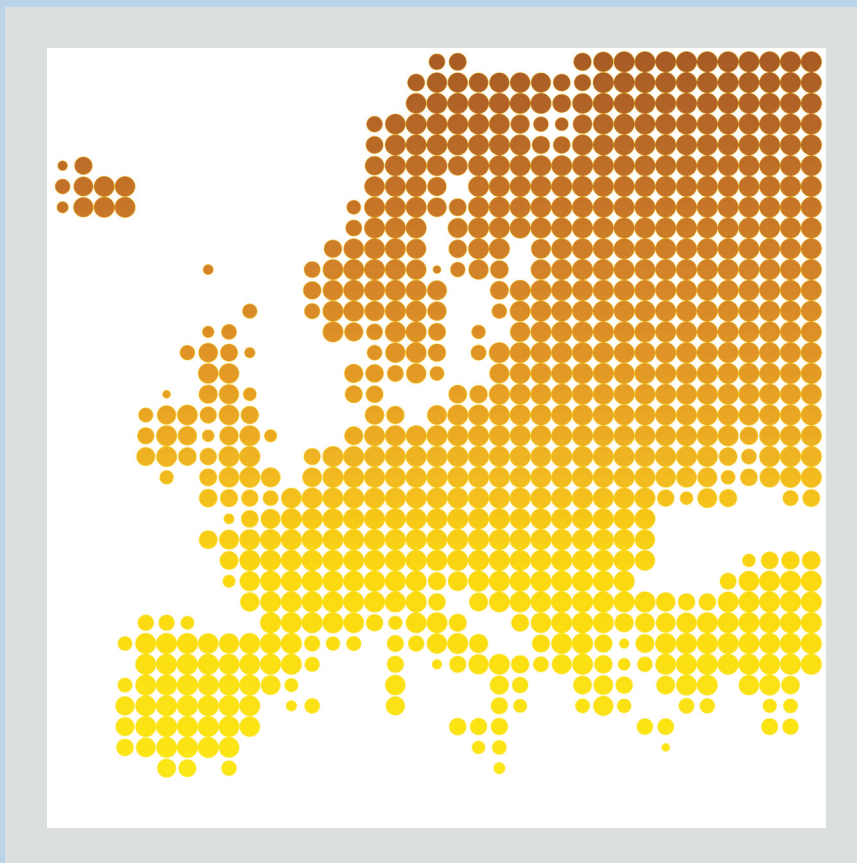


Friedrich Naumann
STIFTUNG **FÜR DIE FREIHEIT**



Integration of the Roma in Central and Southeast Europe: Liberal Policy Recommendations



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STUDIÍ

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Preface

The Integration of the Roma Minority: A Challenge for European Values and Democracy

The integration of the Roma, the largest and at the same time least integrated minority in Europe, has been on the agenda of international organizations, state governments and non-governmental organizations for many years. However, for a variety of reasons all initiatives and approaches have essentially failed to generate suitable and sustainable success. Integration cannot be realized through the top-down approach of laws and regulations, and nor can it be achieved through the allocation of financial resources alone. Paternalistic approaches such as these may, on the contrary, even stimulate dysfunctional patterns of expectation and behaviour within the target group, and thus contribute to further frustration.

After the fall of the various communist regimes, the situation of the Roma minority in most of the countries of Central, East and Southeast Europe generally moved from bad to worse. The economic transition caused a significant number of Roma to lose their employment, and as a result their social status declined further. As a consequence, the problems of discrimination, poverty, widespread unemployment, low educational attainment, dwellings without basic amenities, poor health, and early death are especially grave in this region. However, the migration patterns of Roma to Western Europe, as well as the uproar over their expulsion from France, Italy and other countries, have clearly revealed that the integration of Roma is an overall European problem that needs to be tackled jointly.

Proceeding from this perspective, the EU launched a new initiative in 2011 under the designation 'Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020'. The Framework asks the Member States to find sustainable solutions to the problems of poverty, discrimination and exclusion, on the basis of the protection and promotion of fundamental human and civil rights, in order to "make a tangible difference to Roma people's lives". The EU Framework recognizes the need for comprehensive and multi-targeted approaches, with a focus on the priority areas of education, employment, housing, and health and social care. It also acknowledges the time pressure: strategies and instruments must be applied to bring about a significant improvement in the current situation by 2020. *If the elected governments and civil societies of the EU do not find solutions, extremists of all sorts will be even more vigorous in coming forward with their approaches, based on racism, discrimination, xenophobia and violence.*

Need for Liberal Positions and Policy Recommendations

The overall situation of the Roma is a disgrace in a free, just and pluralistic Europe – the discrimination Roma face today is incompatible with the values on which the EU is founded. Roma integration involves issue areas such as human, civil and minority rights; the rule of law; racism and discrimination; property rights; equal opportunities; the right to education; and generally the right to lead a life in dignity, according to one's own choices and aspirations.

In other words, the integration of the Roma affects core liberal values. *Hence, liberals need positions, arguments, strategies and policies on how to tackle the issue!* Roma integration is not just a mere technical question that needs some mechanical use of expertise and social engineering. Integration efforts can only be successful if they are driven by comprehensive political concepts, based on European values and a pluralistic vision of the future. The societies of Central and Southeast Europe in particular face deep social cleavages and huge political conflict stemming from Roma segregation and discrimination. Especially in light of the dynamics of population growth and migration, it is evident that the issue of Roma integration needs meaningful and sustainable solutions quickly. If Europe fails to integrate its largest minority, then the cohesion of entire states and societies is threatened. This would have all sorts of dire consequences, including a resurgence of extremist xenophobic political forces.

It is, therefore, high time to emphasize the liberal core values of freedom and responsibility when dealing with Roma integration. Yet integration is always a dynamic process that affects both sides: the integrating majority groups in society and the minority that seeks integration. The majority must respect the human and civil rights of those citizens who belong to the minority, including the right to diversity, as well as the principle of equal opportunities in terms of access to education, jobs, healthcare or property. For its part, the minority needs to be willing to integrate, to take responsibility for its own development and to respect the rule of law. Hence, liberals need answers to two sets of questions: 1) What is required from the state, political leaders, civil society and institutions such as the EU in order to enable and achieve integration of the Roma? 2) What should be expected of the Roma themselves, in order for them to integrate successfully into the societies of the states in which they live, as citizens with equal rights, freedoms and responsibilities?

In order to find answers to these questions, and to deduce liberal positions and policies from them, the European Liberal Forum asbl (ELF), in cooperation with the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom (FNF) and the Centre for Liberal Studies (CLS) and with financial support from the European Parliament, organized two international workshops in 2012. These focused on the conditions for Roma integration in Central and Southeast Europe, where the threats and challenges to social cohesion are most pressing.¹ The first tangible outcome was a comprehensive analytical study on the general situation in five new Member States of the EU (the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria), jointly published by ELF, FNF and CLS.²

¹ The EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies: Visions and Realities, Opportunities and Challenges for Roma Integration in Central and Southeast Europe, Prague, May 2-3, 2012; The EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies: The Liberal Approach for Implementation in Central and Southeast Europe, Sofia, November 15-17, 2012.

² Will Guy and Ivan Gabal (eds.): The Situation of the Roma Minority in Selected New Member States of the European Union, Brussels/Sofia/Prague: ELF/FNF/CLS, 2012.

Specifically liberal positions, strategies and policy recommendations are the focus of this paper. The publishers are grateful to Péter Krekó, Director of the Political Capital Institute, Budapest, who produced the first draft, based on the conclusions and the data of the comprehensive study. First and foremost, it addresses liberal policy makers who are seeking a comprehensive overview of how to tackle the issue of Roma integration from a liberal perspective; but it also targets experts, stakeholders and other interested parties who want to understand the added value of liberal approaches and recommendations. The following 18 points sum up our proposals for liberal policies of Roma integration.

Susanne Hartig, Executive Director, European Liberal Forum asbl

Dr. René Klaff, Regional Director, Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom

Dr. Borek Severa, Executive Director, Centre for Liberal Studies

General Principles of a Liberal Roma Integration Approach

I. A comprehensive perspective for Roma integration is needed. Roma face profound difficulties in each of the main policy areas identified by the EU Framework Strategy, i.e. education, employment, housing, health and social care. Yet these are not distinct, but rather interlocking issues. Consequently, a comprehensive multi-sectoral and coordinated integration strategy is required. For example, rehousing Roma families without dealing with unemployment and the poor educational attainment of their children does little to reduce their marginalization.

The National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS) of the five countries studied in our previous publication (the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria) propose such integrated approaches, but have fallen short in implementing them. Countries need to learn from good-practice examples. It may be worth looking at the example of Spain, for instance, for specific measures based on individual profiling of precise needs and backed by sustained political will to improve the situation of the minority as a whole.

II. The state is not omnipotent. The EU and the Member States themselves are unable to solve every problem through 'top-down' strategies that seek to pull up the Roma communities from above. Efficient integration strategies must rely on cooperation between the different actors, i.e. the Roma communities, the state, local municipalities, NGOs and the private sector. This is a logical consequence that flows from the two-sided process of integration. Sustainable progress will depend on establishing genuine trust between Roma and non-Roma in local communities. The 'national contact points' that have been set up in some Member States to manage and implement integration strategies can play a vital role in stimulating such cooperation. Effective working partnerships between central state bodies and regional and local authorities need to be established as well. The active involvement of Roma NGOs and individuals can play a key part, as can anti-discrimination training for officials and community leaders and sensitively designed awareness-raising campaigns that emphasize shared inter-communal benefits.

III. Pay attention to the individuals, not just the communities. Though discrimination and exclusion may be common denominators, the Roma in any given country differ from one another in terms of the history of their communities, their family backgrounds, employment situation and even their status of integration. Roma city dwellers may live quite different lives from Roma in rural areas or in segregated settlements. Therefore there can be no successful 'one-size-fits-all' policy towards Roma that presupposes similar needs and that does not take account of particular conditions. Any liberal integration strategy must pay attention to the individual, and not just the wider community. Meaningful policies must be based on encouraging, stimulating and rewarding individual initiatives, especially with respect to employment and self-employment (e.g. systematic profiling and training of individuals and families, support for new enterprises) and education (e.g. paying special attention to talented Roma students).

IV. Integration needs motivation, not subsidization. In the past few decades, billions of euros have been spent on Roma integration all across Europe – including, of course, in the transition countries of Central, East and Southeast Europe – only for the realization then to dawn that in several respects the lives of the Roma used to be better under Communism. This is a clear indication that traditional policies have failed. Successful integration cannot simply be bought. Financial resources are necessary, of course, but are not in themselves sufficient to ensure effective integration strategies. Liberal integration policies should go

far beyond mere direct monetary transfers. Not only does subsidization without clear, measurable and attainable objectives reduce the motivation to integrate, but it may even encourage individual Roma to continue in their present situation. This is especially true of sections of the Roma elite who, for whatever reason, have no interest in losing whatever subsidies can be obtained.

Rather than the traditional-style distribution of social benefits, important features of functional integration programmes include targeted programmes, more efficient use of funds and a focus on competence-building. Stimulation, incentives and the inspiration drawn from individual initiatives to integrate are crucial in the four priority areas of education, employment, housing and healthcare. Sanctions, especially the loss of financial benefits, must be part of any scheme or initiative that involves public subsidies. And those sanctions must be imposed when agreed patterns of conduct are violated – or, naturally, when the law is broken.

Furthermore, it is important to encourage Roma communities to articulate their own interests, by helping to train Roma leaders and by launching civic education programmes. The same is true of genuine political representation: it is only natural for Roma to play their role as citizens of their countries within the framework of the political institutions.

V. Avoid using double standards to win the support of the non-Roma population. The support of the majority groups in society is necessary for any strategy to integrate minorities, even if prejudice against the latter is widespread. Many citizens in the five countries of our primary analysis feel, for instance, that the Roma have certain privileges that the non-Roma do not enjoy, due to institutional positive discrimination or even tolerance of certain unacceptable behaviour (such as petty crime). Even if these feelings are exaggerated, they should not be ignored.

Practices of positive discrimination should be introduced only with the utmost care and on a limited scale, because they compromise the principle of equal rights and opportunities. Criminal or antisocial behaviour ought not to be tolerated, but should lead to sanctions or punishment according to the law. Tolerance of diversity – a key liberal principle – should not be mistaken for tolerance of wrongdoing.

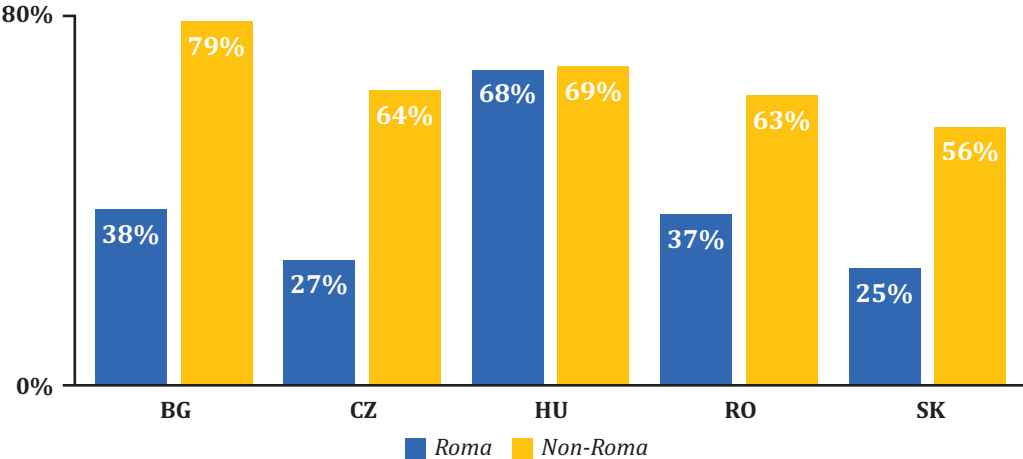
Specific Policies of a Liberal Roma Integration Approach

1. Start integration in kindergarten and school as early as possible. The right to education is a cornerstone of the liberal value system. Compulsory school education for everyone – a liberal quest since the nineteenth century – is an important precondition for the creation of equal opportunities. Young Roma have a right to access quality education the same as everyone else. Research has shown that early education is pivotal for social inclusion. In general, Roma children aged five and six lag significantly behind non-Roma neighbouring children in cognitive outcomes; but those who attend kindergarten perform better and are also more likely to go on to secondary education. Therefore, general education that is both compulsory and accessible for everyone should be maintained and extended to pre-school education.

But it is also important to note that Roma parents have a key responsibility to ensure that their children actually attend kindergarten and school. They may have to change their (possibly ambivalent) attitude towards the existing educational system. Subsidies should be made conditional and should reward regular school attendance (as is the case in Hungary, for example) or even pre-school attendance (See Figure 1 for enrolment rates).

Education is, among other things, the key to getting qualified jobs, which is the only way out of poverty. But high numbers of Roma children continue to underperform at school and to drop out early. At the same time, the prevailing trends on the labour market mean that prospective employees must seek sufficient literacy, mathematical ability and competence in general: attributes that can only be obtained through education. Those lacking in these necessary skills generally find it harder to obtain reasonable employment.

Figure 1: Pre-school enrolment rate (Percentage of the entire under-school-age population aged 3–6 that is enrolled in a pre-school facility)



Source: pooled data from UNDP/WB/EC regional survey 2011 and FRA pilot survey 2011.

2. Combat segregation and institutional prejudice. Widespread antipathy towards the Roma finds institutional expression in educational segregation. Many Roma children are placed in so-called ‘special schools’ for those with learning difficulties, or simply in separate Roma classes. For liberals, this practice is unacceptable because it is essentially racist – it discriminates against individuals on the basis that they belong to a specific group. Yet even some Roma parents, fearing that their children may be mistreated, prefer to have them segregated. However, consignment to a special school – with a reduced curriculum and low qualifications – severely limits future educational and employment prospects.

Liberals opt for integrated education in school, and even in kindergarten, as a tool to prevent exclusion and segregation from the majority. Separate schools or separate classes for Roma pupils compromise the aim of integration. Poor performance by Roma children in integrated classes is not an argument for segregation, as it usually hints at more fundamental shortcomings in the education system, e.g. in meeting special educational needs. In order to combat institutional segregation, the following steps are recommended:

- The Roma themselves should play an active role in demolishing the barriers of hostility. Involving the parents of Roma children in education and early education could also help to create an environment of trust between Roma families and the schools.
- Encouraging the employment of more Roma teachers and teaching assistants could also help to reduce ethnic tensions in school. These instructors could also serve as role models and special mentors for Roma children.
- Physical barriers of integration, such as the lack of transport to school, need to be eliminated.
- Teachers and students alike should be trained to be more tolerant of the Roma. Anti-discrimination training should begin in kindergarten, but should be made compulsory in the curricula of elementary and secondary education. Other multicultural communities can provide numerous examples from which to learn (for instance, the Mosaic Model in the USA). Civil organizations could also play an active role in the development and administration of such programmes.
- After-school activities and the concept of whole-day schools can serve to reduce the differences that emerge as a consequence of very different home environments. Such schemes should be encouraged, funded and provided with the requisite expertise. If the necessary screening and control mechanisms are in place, cost barriers preventing Roma families from participating should be removed.

3. Support young Roma with greater ambitions and talent. Well-educated and professionally successful Roma who do not depend on paternalistic structures can act as role models and thus function as important drivers of integration for the whole community. With adequate individual screening and control mechanisms in place, it is reasonable to offer scholarships, grants, allowances and other forms of financial support – both for those whose goal is secondary education and for those aspiring to tertiary education. This would go some way to boost the tiny but growing proportion of Roma with higher-education qualifications.

4. Reduce chronic state dependency by improving the employment situation of the Roma. Roma employment levels are far below those of the majority population (Figure 2). The majority of Roma families rely to a greater or lesser degree on social support, often supplemented by occasional casual work in the grey economy. In many cases, Roma do not enjoy the protection of employment laws, and their wages are very low and often paid cash in hand. This means they do not make insurance and pension contributions. For women and the young, finding work is even harder, and petty crime often offers a tempting alternative. Long-term unemployment and dependence on social security is the norm for many Roma adults.

Changing this dependence on the state by improving the employment situation among the Roma must be a top priority for effective inclusion strategies. In order to reduce the demotivating role of the subsidies, it is crucial that earnings from paid work (even minimal wage) should exceed the amount of subsidies that an unemployed person can get.

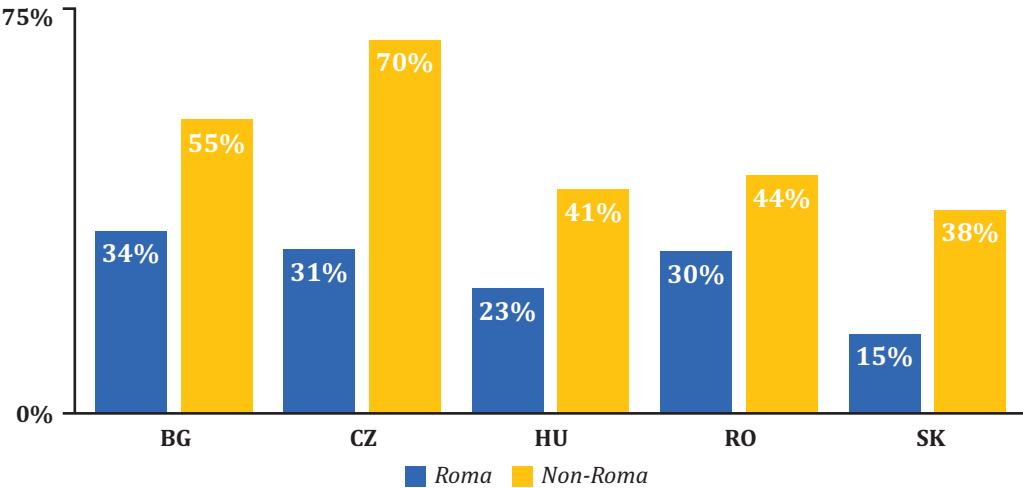
5. Make the labour market more flexible and less restrictive. Inflexible labour markets and restrictive labour legislation have severe negative effects on low-income social groups and on the Roma in particular. Rising minimum wages and social security taxes have a particularly strong impact on poorly educated individuals who live in conditions of social and economic exclusion. Such policies drive many Roma out of the labour market, leading to a further decline in their socioeconomic status.

Existing targeted employment programmes and training schemes should be made more flexible, and red tape should be reduced in order to encourage more employers to take on Roma workers. In particular, the complicated application process for these programmes and the frequent inclusion of binding clauses related to the minimum duration of employment contracts make many employers reluctant to participate in such programmes.

6. Aim at market work instead of public work. Although public job creation schemes may be important in combating unemployment, it should be noted that they are likely to offer only short-term solutions to unemployment and fail to contribute to the general integration of the Roma. Artificially created public jobs can thus perpetuate the Roma’s dependence on the state – unless the work helps them meet the requirements of the open job market.

In order to reduce the structural labour shortage that affects certain occupations in need of skilled workers (e.g. the construction sector), government agencies should support and facilitate educational and adult training programmes to teach the Roma population specific skills that are in demand, and should involve the private sector in preparing and running such training programmes. Seasonal labour contracts can be an effective (and completely legal) way of providing members of the Roma minority with jobs on the free market, as the experience of Germany has shown.

Figure 2: Employment rate among the Roma and non-Roma (Share of those employed, as a percentage of people of working age [15–64])



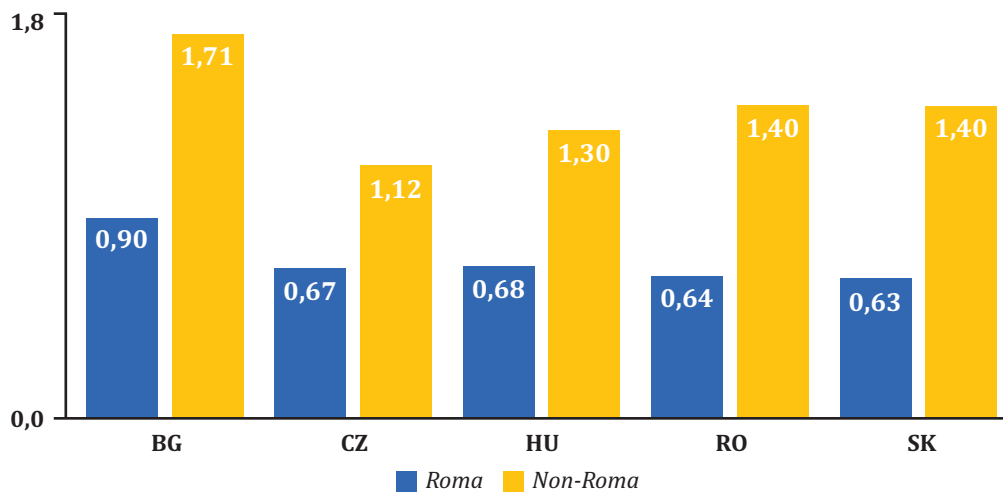
Source: UNDP/WB/EC regional survey 2011. This does not include data from the FRA Roma pilot survey 2011

7. Encourage the entrepreneurial spirit of the Roma. With effective monitoring and evaluation in place, subsidies for Roma enterprises may be a key to genuine social mobility. Specific training programmes and credit schemes could encourage the Roma to establish their own small businesses. France and Spain can provide successful examples of such initiatives, which rely on individual targeting and guidance. Furthermore, encouraging the private sector to employ Roma citizens can offer a genuine stimulus to the employment rate of the Roma.

8. Legalize non-official dwellings. Many Roma families in rural areas, on the edge of towns and in segregated settlements have very poor and sometimes catastrophic housing conditions. Moreover, the average occupancy level of Roma dwellings in the five countries examined is twice that of non-Roma houses (Figure 3). Many squats and shacks are improvised, often illegal, and officially do not exist. Hence, they cannot be connected up to public utilities. Consequently, electrical connections are frequently makeshift and hazardous, and many homes have no running water (Figure 4). Heating is usually inadequate. The occupants do not own the land on which they have settled, and thus are increasingly exposed to forced evictions.

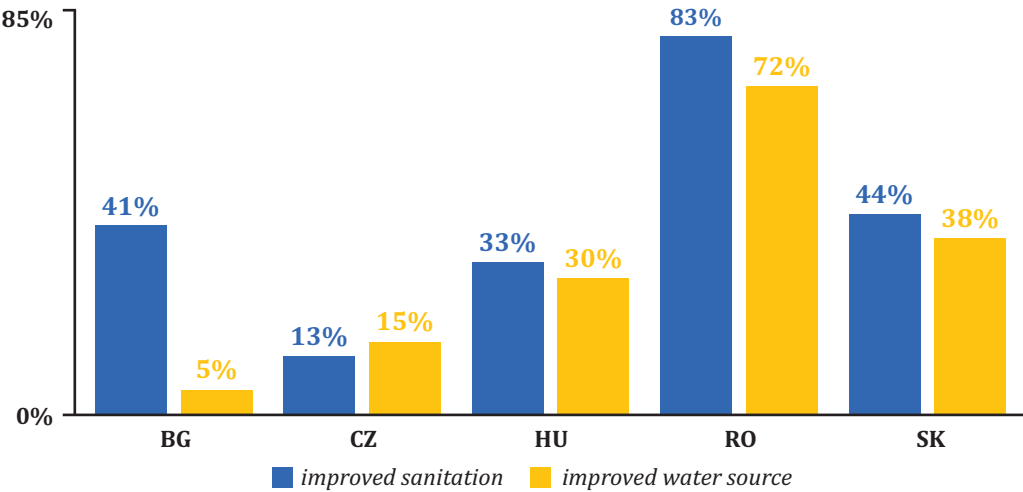
Legalizing at least those dwellings that meet the criteria for being pronounced habitable could genuinely contribute to securing the status, as well as the actual living conditions of Roma families, since these houses would subsequently be entitled to connect up to public utilities. Such a move may also benefit the majority population, by reducing the hazards to health and the environment posed by houses without public utility connections.

Figure 3: Average number of rooms per household member (excluding kitchen, corridor, toilet, bathroom and any room rented out)



Source: pooled data from UNDP/WB/EC regional survey 2011 and FRA pilot survey 2011.

Figure 4: Inaccessibility to improved water source or sanitation (Share of the Roma population living in households without piped water inside the dwelling or in the garden, or without a toilet or bathroom inside the dwelling, as a percentage of the total Roma population surveyed)



Source: pooled data from UNDP/WB/EC regional survey 2011 and FRA pilot survey 2011.

9. Improve the basic housing infrastructure. Roma families that live among the majority population have many advantages over those that are in Roma concentrations. The aim should be to ensure that the Roma have the same access to services available to other citizens. In terms of housing, this could include grants or loans for repairs, renovations and improvements, or legal advice for families in rented accommodation. This would often also benefit the majority population in the immediate vicinity, as it could lead to a rise in house prices in the village. By making home improvements and connecting houses up to basic amenities, the incidence of infectious disease and parasites could be reduced substantially.

The more effective use of EU funds could help with this goal. The European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) can be used for housing projects; however, the take-up of these funds by countries in Central and Southeast Europe is still very limited and inadequate. Combined with resources from the European Social Fund – echoing the principle of an integrated approach – the adequate use of such funds could help to relieve considerably the financial burden on these countries.

10. Re-establish the rule of law. Some of the most socially excluded neighbourhoods have been virtually abandoned by the state. Exploitative landlords and gangsters operate with impunity, and drug use and prostitution are widespread. Meanwhile the police often offer the Roma little or no protection. Roma indebtedness is greatly worsened by their dependence on illegal loan sharks – both Roma and non-Roma – who charge exorbitant rates of interest and often take possession of a family’s entire social benefit payments month after month. In some countries, far-right political parties and movements can make political gains by sending out paramilitary organizations to patrol these areas.

Such a situation violates the very basis not only of the rule of law, but of the entire fabric of any democratic, open and peaceful society. It also compromises the goal of the successful and sustainable integration of those minorities involved – either as victims or as perpetrators. The state has an obligation to protect every citizen and to reinstate its monopoly on force – otherwise extremists will maintain their own order.

11. Support families in raising children, rather than juvenile homes. Raising children should primarily be the responsibility of their parents, rather than of the state. Poor material conditions and poverty are the main reasons for Roma children ending up in juvenile homes in large numbers. They are heavily overrepresented in children's homes in the five countries analysed: they account for between a quarter and four-fifths of all children in such institutions. But rather than removing children from their families and putting them in these establishments (frequently on account of their parents' poverty), it would be more humane and would make more sense in terms of social stability to support families, so that their children can remain with them (unless, of course, the children's fundamental rights are violated in their own families). It would even be cheaper. Removing children to juvenile homes is a strong intervention in the lives of families. It is often perceived as an unjust decision by the state, and as a hostile move that just serves to increase the alienation of Roma from non-Roma.

12. Promote health education. Roma should be encouraged to change their often self-destructive lifestyles and habits, in order to improve their often catastrophic health. Low life expectancy, high teenage pregnancy rates and a high incidence of cardiovascular disease characterize many Roma communities. In the five countries analysed, on average Roma men and women have a life expectancy that is ten years below that of men and women from the majority society. Similarly, infant mortality rates among the Roma in these countries are between two and six times higher than in the overall population. Besides general poverty, unhealthy lifestyles are cited as being among the main reasons for the low life expectancy of the Roma; these would include smoking and poor diet – both responsibilities of the individual. Drug addiction, often associated with HIV/AIDS and alcoholism are serious problems, particularly in the most socially excluded locations. Unsafe water, primitive sanitation, uncollected garbage and unhygienic conditions lead to a higher incidence of infectious disease and parasites than in the general population. Sometimes Roma people are not even aware of the health risks posed by their environment and their lifestyles.

Bearing in mind the role of intergenerational transfer in health behaviour, health education programmes that adopt a 'lifelong learning' approach and that focus on both children and their parents could help Roma families change their self-destructive lifestyles. Encouraging preventive medicine would also be important: relatively few Roma avail themselves of services like screening, immunization and regular check-ups, but these can bring substantial benefits.

13. Create equal opportunities – let Roma have access to basic services and involve mediators. Healthcare is an especially sensitive issue, particularly in Romania and Bulgaria, where less than half of the Roma population is insured. In other countries – such as Hungary, where most of the Roma have healthcare insurance – Roma are often suspicious of the healthcare system and are reluctant to use medical institutions.

Carefully planned and sustainable basic health insurance programmes and health education schemes must be provided to every citizen if substantial inclusion is to be achieved by 2020. Roma mediators can be of great help in offering general health advice, including family planning, and in improving Roma access to services. They can be key actors in health education as well. Also, extra training for non-Roma health professionals can improve their empathy for Roma and their health problems. Many Roma families need advice to enable them to access public health services effectively, and mediators can assist in negotiations with officials. However, reliable funding is probably required to ensure the sustainability of their work.

Furthermore, the circulation of illegal medications should be eliminated – Roma need the same access to prescription medicines as everyone else. Though it imposes a burden on the state budget, basic medications ought to be free of charge for the most vulnerable, i.e. poorer families, children, pregnant women, the elderly and disabled, and the unemployed. To tackle the problem of remoteness from healthcare facilities, mobile health units should be employed to reach those in needs. Such units have been operating in Bulgaria and Slovakia.

It is also important to note that the state cannot solve this problem on its own: it is crucial to subsidize NGOs that are willing to help. Drug rehabilitation and HIV/AIDS projects can produce positive results, especially in such difficult environments.

Regional Office for Central, East and Southeast Europe, South Caucasus and Central Asia (CESE)

The major tasks of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom (FNF) are the promotion of democracy, human and civil rights, pluralism and market economy. To achieve our goals, we use the classic instruments of political education, political consultancy and political dialogue, such as conferences, workshops, publications and exchange programs. In our projects we cooperate with liberal-minded networks of political parties, citizens' initiatives, human rights organizations, think tanks and scientific institutions. In the vast region of CESE, the Foundation maintains offices and projects in six sub-regions: Central Europe and the Baltic states; Southeast Europe; West Balkans; Ukraine and Belarus; Russia and Central Asia; and South Caucasus. Currently, the CESE Regional Office in Sofia coordinates activities in 27 project countries. The Foundation has some 40 staff members in the region's ten representative offices. Our activities in the entire region amount to roughly 500 events per year with several thousand participants.

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Centre for Liberal Studies

Centre for Liberal Studies (CLS) was established in 1994 as foundation and then re-established in 1999 as civic society organisation. It is a non-governmental, non-partisan, non-profit think tank. The main objective is to develop contacts between exponents of liberal thoughts, to contribute to clarifying the definition of liberalism, to define its place in contemporary society, and to apply liberal approach in political, economic, social transition of the Czech Republic towards a full-fledged liberal democracy.

Due to a long-term absence of any stable liberal political party in the Czech political landscape, CLS is along with Liberal Institute the only promoter of liberal ideas in this country. Activities of CLS focus on panel discussions, round tables, conferences and expert publications in various fields.

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What is the European Liberal Forum?

Founded in the fall of 2007, the European Liberal Forum, asbl (ELF) is the non-profit European political foundation of the liberal family. ELF brings together liberal think tanks, political foundations and institutes from around Europe to observe, analyse and contribute to the debate on European public policy issues and the process of European integration, through education, training, research and the promotion of active citizenship within the EU.

The role of the European Liberal Forum is to:

- Serve as a framework for think tanks, national political foundations, institutes, academics and leading liberal personalities to work together at European level.
- Develop close working relationships with and among its member organisations, the national parliamentary groups, the ALDE Party in the European Parliament, Liberal International (LI), the world federation of liberal political parties, and the European Liberal Youth (LYMEC), the youth organisation of the ALDE Party.
- Observe, analyse and contribute to the debate on European public policy issues and the process of European integration, through education, training, research and the promotion of active citizenship within the European Union, particularly with regard to young Europeans.
- Strengthen the liberal, democrat and reform movement in the European Union and throughout Europe.
- Seek a common position, as a transfer of experience gained from the contracting Members, on all important matters affecting the European Union.
- Support liberal democracy throughout Europe and its neighbourhood.
- Inform the public and involve it in the construction of a united European democracy.
- Support and cosponsor European seminars, conferences and studies on such issues between the aforementioned stakeholders.

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