

Country fiche: BELGIUM

Position of civil society involved in the Roma Civil Monitor

SUBSTANTIVE POLICY AREAS

STRENGTHS/KEY ELEMENTS OF THE MS APPROACH

WEAKNESSES/GAPS/RECOMMENDATIONS

EDUCATION

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Belgian education system includes several tools to support diversity in schools. • In certain cities, Traveller children can attend language classes on-site several days a week. • In Flanders, the NRIS mentioned additional funds for schools with a significant number of Travellers, in order for them to develop more tailor-made approaches to education. There does not seem to be details available on the use of these funds. • For Wallonia, the NRIS planned on the deployment of Roma mediators. However, only one Roma mediator has been hired since. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extreme poverty even homelessness that many Roma face has negative impact on school attendance. • The educational system not adapted to mobile lifestyle is a reason for low school participation among Travellers. • Many Roma face school discrimination, with enrolment denials explained by their so-called “learning lag” or out of fear of “attracting too many disadvantaged children”. |
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EMPLOYMENT

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The focus is mainly on social services for recent immigrants from Eastern Europe; some authorities hire cultural mediators, and some of them are Roma. • Some NGOs provided intercultural training for social workers in the public sector. • Public employment services’ training programmes are available for Roma youth. • The public sector appeared to be a non-negligible source of employment for foreigners. • Legal provisions against discrimination in access to jobs and in workplace exist and are monitored. The national equality body reports a deteriorating trend in discrimination based on race, ethnicity or country of origin. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The mainstream services do not have safeguards to ensure access for Travellers. • Training for youth should be actively promoted. • Roma rarely report experienced discrimination in accessing jobs and in workplace, according to experts from the national equality body. • There are no initiatives to raise awareness or sensitise employers about discrimination against Roma. |
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HEALTHCARE

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intercultural mediators funded by the federal government are employed in a number of hospitals; the programme improves communication and linguistic barriers. • Several projects are developed to ensure access to basic health care services to the most vulnerable groups of population, involving NGOs. Some project target specifically Roma. • A pilot project concerning healthcare of the Roma run in Sint-Niklaas, with the support of the Flemish government. • Another noteworthy initiative to counter the obstacles to Travellers’ access to health services is in place on the Travellers’ transit site in Ghent. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People residing in Belgium without authorisation (many of them vulnerable Roma citizens of other countries or stateless persons) have restricted access to health care, which is limited to emergency medical assistance (EMA). • Fines for non-urgent health care services under the EMA were introduced, adversely affecting many Roma. • Many Roma who are entitled to access healthcare services are not aware of the fact. • None of about a hundred intercultural mediators currently employed in the health sector is of Roma background. The state should support training and employment of Roma mediators. |
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HOUSING

- The Flemish Housing Inspectorate (FHI) initiated tackling the slumlord phenomenon.
- Some Social Welfare Offices have launched projects of reintegration through housing for Roma, and some Roma mediator programs have also been launched.
- In Flanders and Wallonia, some public authorities were financially supported in the acquisition and equipment of sites for Travellers. Since 2004, the Flemish Community covers 100 per cent of the accommodation costs of residential sites for Travellers.
- CMGVR (*Centre de Médiation des Gens du Voyage et des Roms en Wallonie*) plays a role of counselling and mediation between stakeholders, including Travellers and local populations.
- There are some key cities that have developed strategies to promote the inclusion of migrants, among them Roma.
- Discrimination in housing prevails and remains largely unaddressed. Evictions take place throughout the year, including winter.
- Several of the main cities have witnessed the development of slums inhabited mostly by Roma families (20-50 people).
- Measures to tackle homelessness are generally conceived for single adults and not for families with children, which makes them unsuited for most Roma in need.
- There is neither sufficient, nor compulsory measures organising Travellers' temporary stay in any of the three regions.
- Whereas the NRIS wanted to build on abandoned dilapidated buildings e.g. in Brussels to resolve housing needs (even if temporarily), squats have been criminalised.

HORIZONTAL MEASURES

STRENGTHS/KEY ELEMENTS OF THE MS APPROACH

WEAKNESSES/GAPS/RECOMMENDATIONS

ANTI-DISCRIMINATION

- The antidiscrimination law explicitly allows the use of 'situation testing' in order to prove the existence of discrimination.
- National Equality Body (UNIA) is active in fighting discrimination; it targets the general society, but also specifically public authorities and private companies.
- UNIA offers a service of individual support and assistance for victims of discrimination and cooperates with local administrations and civil society.
- By the anti-discrimination law, the burden of proof resting with the victim. This is a significant barrier for effective protection. Moreover, very few Roma file complaints of alleged discrimination due to mistrust or fear of retaliation.
- UNIA should engage in proactive outreach to Roma communities through its regional offices to increase accessibility of legal support and reinforce mutual trust.
- There are no official temporary halting sites for Travellers. Local authorities that previously allowed families to stay on their land increasingly resort to forced evictions, often carried out in winter.
- Reports by Roma of ethnic profiling and harsh treatment are frequent. In 2015, federal police in Flanders were using a 'Gypsy' tag in their national internal database (UNIA protested).

FIGHTING ANTIGYPSYISM

- UNIA includes measures to combat antigypsyism in its 2016-2018 Strategy.
- UNIA has been active against antigypsyism; it has initiated awareness-raising campaigns, made recommendations to national and regional authorities, and supports NGOs.
- NGOs organise activities (campaigns, training for professionals in public services) aimed at awareness raising, sometimes with cooperation with public authorities.
- Antigypsyism has not been more widely recognised at the national level.
- There is a lack of systematic monitoring of acts of antigypsyism. There is also need for prevention and mediation to tackle the growth of hate-speech.
- State authorities should take responsibility to educate relevant officials to prevent and combat antigypsyism.
- Roma are not reporting on acts of antigypsyism. Coupled with the lack of political interest, this leads to under-documentation of hate-speech and hate-crime.

ADDRESSING SPECIFIC NEEDS OF MOST VULNERABLE GROUPS AMONG ROMA

- Within the framework of the NRIS, a labour market initiative, started in 2008, and has been continued by the *Vorming Centrum Groep INTRO*, in Molenbeek; The initiative
- The participation in preschool education of Traveller children remains a challenge, as currently there are no education services adapted to a mobile lifestyle.

aimed to improve youth employment, with the involvement of Roma mediators.

- Since 2016, Roma have access to the “integration path” set up for foreigners and people of foreign origin in Wallonia. This support is intended to help them learn French language, to have a basic knowledge of society, to increase their opportunities of participating in society, to find employment, and to support their children’s schooling.

STRUCTURAL MEASURES

STRENGTHS/KEY ELEMENTS OF THE MS APPROACH

WEAKNESSES/GAPS/RECOMMENDATIONS

STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT AT THE CENTRAL LEVEL

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NRIS, adopted in 2012, advocates for a comprehensive approach including 2020 objectives: participation, access to education, employment, healthcare, housing, migrations monitoring, social integration, political coordination, anti-discrimination and data collection. • Inter-ministerial working group on Roma inclusion serves as National Roma Contact Point (NRCP) and is responsible for evaluations of NRIS implementation or formulation of recommendations on its adjustments. • National Roma Platform (NRP) was launched in 2016 with the aim to formulate recommendations to decision-makers, and to participate in the evaluation of the national strategy. • UNIA is a member of the NRP steering committee and has at least two formal meetings with the NRCP every year. • Since 2012, the Flemish Department of Interior Affairs has its own action plan: the <i>Vlaamse Actieplan MOE (Roma)-Migranten</i>. Officially, it targets all immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe, but according to most stakeholders it is tailor-made for Roma migrants. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Currently no person of Roma or Traveller descent is directly involved in the national and regional politics outside of informal consultation. • There are no longer any Roma or Travellers, nor civil society representatives represented amongst the permanent members of the NRCP. |
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CIVIL PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At the federal level, a National Council of Roma, Sinti and Travellers (National Roma Council) was created by the Minister to Equal Opportunities following the production of the national strategy. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Several Roma organisations and representatives were consulted in the preparation of the national strategy, but their opinions were weakly considered in the final NRIS. On this ground, soon after the strategy was released, several civil society organisations involved in the consultation process distanced themselves from its content. • Since 2012, no consultation was organised with the civil society concerning NRIS. |
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MAINSTREAMING OF ROMA INCLUSION AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Flanders, the <i>VZW Integratie-Inburgering</i> is in charge of implementing the Flemish integration policies and decrees (notably the civil integration program: a year of civic lessons and Flemish language classes plus counselling for socio-professional trajectory). They offer information and tailored guidance to local authorities and services with regards to diversity management. Two cities in Flanders have their own <i>Integratie-Inburgering</i> agencies: Antwerp and Gent. • In Brussels, following different calls for proposals from the Region of Brussels, more and more municipalities get involved into Roma integration projects, notably through | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is currently no official site dedicated to hosting Travellers in Brussels. End 2011, one site was inaugurated in Haren, but it closed after a year due to management problems, and it never reopened. |
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their public social assistance centres (CPAS) and Prevention and Proximity Services.

- A call for proposals of the Region of Brussels (end of 2015) offers subsidies for the creation and accommodation of Travellers sites.
- Over the last few years, several municipalities started recruiting Roma mediators, who are often attached to the public social assistance centres or to prevention or proximity services. Mediators are widely reported to play a crucial role in facilitating both the communication with Roma and their inclusion in the wider society.

DATA COLLECTION

- The Belgian Strategy for Roma inclusion distinguishes between the Roma and Travellers communities.
- Ways of data collection differ from one Region to another; Wallonia remains in a relatively restrictive frame when it comes to the production of “ethnic categories”, while the Flemish Community authorises certain forms of data collection.

- Ethnic profiling and data collection are prohibited in Belgium. There is a need for more qualitative research and data, which correspond better to the realities of the Roma and Traveller communities.

FUNDING FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

- Since 2012, Belgium is involved in ROMED, the European training program for Roma mediators. The training cycles are organised in the frame of the national strategy for Roma Integration, with the main objective of fostering the participation and empowerment of the Roma population within the Belgian society.
- NGO’s with a social and/or cultural orientation have access to general public funding to fight exclusion, promote race and gender equality, support social and educative promotion, foster migrant inclusion. In this respect, they focus their projects on Roma inclusion.

- Some important funding measures are only available through public tenders (mainly local authorities, CPAS, Provinces).
- Roma and Travellers NGOs, because of their lack of human and financial resources, have no real access to funding for their activities.

EXAMPLE OF PROMISING PRACTICE

Local Roma NGO acts to support school education of both Roma and Traveller children: Mobile animations with Traveller children and school support for Roma pupils. Since 2004, the CMGVR has insured a regular presence on the field with Travellers groups in the frame of a “mobile school support” project. The aim surely is not to replace school itself, but to provide complementary support to Traveller families and children in their learning process (with a focus on reading, writing and calculation). The families who are interested in organizing these classes on-site call upon the educational team of the CMGVR, which then come on site with a mobile home with a capacity of up to ten children. To support Roma children, the CMGVR has developed a project addressed to Roma families willing to learn French, which a requisite for their integration in Belgium. The project is based on the acknowledgement that improving French language skills is a key tool to develop all other competences. These French language reinforcement sessions are organized mostly within school buildings, but always outside class hours.

MOST IMPORTANT PRIORITIES TO BE ADDRESSED

- To establish fields for Travellers’ residential and temporary stay in order to reduce forced evictions and to improve the relationship with the sedentary population.
- To develop and promote of intercultural mediation to improve the socio-economic inclusion of Roma and Travelers. Intercultural mediators should belong to Roma or Travellers community, have a good knowledge of public and civil society institutions and be fluent in their community language as well as national language.
- To ensure the official consultation and participations of Travellers and Roma leaders/representatives in all policy decisions in which they are an explicit target category.
- To recognise antigypsyism as a specific form of racism in order to establish targeted programs to combat it.
- To recognise Roma as a persecuted and segregated minority in asylum procedures.



ROMA CIVIL
MONITOR