Roma equality, inclusion and participation in territorial planning and development

Discussion Paper[*]

1. Introduction – What are territorial inequalities?

Territorial inequalities represent disparities in development, wealth, and opportunities among geographical areas. The consequences are lagging areas that fall behind economically and socially (disadvantaged areas) compared to other, more prosperous ones. Social and spatial factors interact in a mutually self-perpetuating process. **Territorial inequalities** reinforce social inequalities, while social inequalities further entrench spatial disparities. For example, socially vulnerable populations may be pushed into segregated neighbourhoods with poor infrastructure and limited services; these living conditions contribute to the further social exclusion of residents. Finally, areas inhabited by socially excluded populations are often overlooked by decision-makers and do not benefit from wider social and economic development. We can observe a similar dialectical relationship between the symbolic status and stigmatisation of a place and its residents, in particular when it comes to racialised groups. This cyclical relationship underscores the need for integrated approaches that address both social and spatial dimensions to effectively combat territorial inequalities.

Roma often experience a pronounced form of exclusion that is intricately linked to territorial inequality. Because of discrimination in the housing market, poverty, and individual choices (that may seem rational in the short term – such as seeking the proximity of relatives who substitute public services that discriminate against Roma – but have negative consequences in the longer run), the Roma population often concentrates in disadvantaged areas.[1] The result is **double marginalisation**, referring to the compounded effects of being marginalised as members of a minority group facing discrimination and structural

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[*] This discussion paper was prepared by Marek Hojsík (Democracy Institute of Central European University, Budapest, and Faculty of Science of Charles University, Prague). The content of the draft paper has been shaped by consultation with civil society organisations, experts, and international organisations.

[1] E.g., in Slovakia, research has shown that the Roma population is concentrated in the country's three regions with the lowest GDP per capita. (Markovič, F. & Plachá, L. (2023). *Príjmy a životné podmienky v marginalizovaných rómskych komunitách: Vybrané ukazovatele zo zisťovania EU SILC_MRK 2020 [Income and living conditions in marginalized Roma communities: selected indicators from EU SILC MRC 2020]*. Office of Plenipotentiary of the Slovak Government for Roma communities, p. 21)

disadvantage, on the one hand, and, on the other, as residents of disadvantaged areas. In the case of persons belonging to vulnerable groups among Roma, such as women, elderly, persons with disabilities and others, additional disadvantages multiply their marginalisation. An above-average number of children in socially excluded areas contributes to higher rates of child poverty.

2. EU policy responses to territorial inequalities

The **EU Strategic Framework for Roma Equality, Inclusion and Participation** (2020-2030) and the related Council Recommendations recognise regional inequalities as a significant factor contributing to the exclusion of Roma communities and call on Member States to link Roma inclusion efforts with broader territorial development strategies.

EU policies address territorial inequalities through a variety of mechanisms aimed at promoting balanced development across regions and ensuring that no area is left behind. The best known of these in relation to Roma equality is **Cohesion Policy**, which allocates significant funding to less developed regions (392 billion EUR in the current programming period). The European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) invests in essential services, school, healthcare, and social infrastructure, as well as innovation, business development, green transformation, and other fields. The European Social Fund (ESF+) finances skills and job creation, as well as reforms in social inclusion, education and employment. The Cohesion Fund (CF) invests in the environment and trans-EU transport networks in the less prosperous EU countries.

In the context of territorial development, other EU policy tools relevant to Roma equality, inclusion and participation are the Urban Agenda for the EU and the Common Agricultural Policy. The **Urban Agenda for the EU** focuses on improving the implementation of EU laws and instruments in cities, helping cities attract EU funds, and exchanging experiences and know-how in areas such as housing, urban poverty, the local economy, the digital and energy transition, and others. Similarly, **Common Agricultural Policy** (CAP) supports rural development by fostering innovation in agriculture, forestry and rural areas, the viability and development of farms and the promotion of social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas.

3. Tackling territorial inequalities and harnessing territorial planning to foster Roma equality, inclusion and participation

Different types of territories (such as urban vs. rural areas, less developed (micro-) regions, and sparsely populated regions) and levels of governance face unique challenges.[2] Therefore, differentiated policy responses are necessary for tackling related territorial inequalities. In this text, we focus on two typical situations: segregated neighbourhoods within urbanised areas and disadvantaged rural regions.[3]

From the point of view of targeted policies, the identification of social inclusion challenges is of crucial importance. Member States use different methods to identify disadvantaged areas, including diverse social and economic statistical indicators, field mapping and other methods, and monitor interventions. In **urban areas**, diverse economic, social, and institutional mechanisms produce disadvantaged and segregated neighbourhoods where vulnerable people concentrate because of their socioeconomic status, ethnicity, migrant background, status as asylum seekers or being under temporary protection (such as

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[2] Data from the Roma Survey 2021 indicate, for example, that the rate of completion of at least upper secondary education among Roma aged 20-24 years in urban areas was 31%, while in rural areas, only 24%. The at-risk-of-poverty rate was highest among Roma living in cities (densely populated areas), at an average of 87%, while in rural areas (thinly populated areas), the average was 83%, and in towns and suburbs (intermediate density areas) 78%. Interestingly, the average share of Roma aged 20-64 years in paid work across the eight EU Member States was 43% regardless of their living in rural or urban areas. (FRA 2022. Roma Survey 2021. Online data visualization)

[3] For a more nuanced discussion of diverse challenges related to different types of territories, see, for example, the European Commission's *Ninth Report on Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion*, published this year (2024).

Roma refugees from Ukraine) or for other reasons (however, similar patterns of exclusion can also be identified within rural settlements[4]). Inhabitants of such areas usually have limited access to the quality public services used by the mainstream population, including essential services, suffer from poor housing conditions and a lack of security, and face social exclusion and stigmatisation. Often, the concentration of vulnerable populations in segregated areas (urban or rural) is on the increase, even if the number of segregated neighbourhoods in a country is decreasing.[5] Therefore, the solutions should focus on desegregation and deghettoisation.

Inhabitants of disadvantaged neighbourhoods should have the opportunity to move to other parts of the municipality if they prefer. **Inclusive housing**, meaning access to affordable and accessible accommodation for different population groups without discrimination, fosters equitable communities with access to integrated services and jobs.

A dilemma may arise between, on the one hand, developing services in disadvantaged neighbourhoods that are easily accessible to local inhabitants and can contribute to the locality's improvement and, on the other hand, improving the access of inhabitants of disadvantaged neighbourhoods to integrated public services outside segregated areas. The former creates a risk of conserving or even deepening segregation and undermining social cohesion; additionally, segregated services in disadvantaged areas are often of lower quality. The latter requires tackling problems of discrimination against Roma (and other groups) in mainstream services and their accessibility (capacity, distance and other issues). For example, there is a consensus that integrated education should be prioritised over proximity (with the exception of early education and care, where services need to be provided close to families). Enabling access to mainstream services and jobs requires the development of frequent, affordable, and reliable public transport connections with the city, as well as safe and accessible footpaths and access roads.

Through proactive prevention and combating ghettoisation and stigmatisation, municipalities should support the convergence of disadvantaged neighbourhoods with mainstream areas. The needs and realisation of the rights of their inhabitants must be assessed and addressed by **urban/territorial planning** and the equitable and fair distribution of public resources for improving living conditions, responding to current challenges such as the consequences of climate change, the need for increasing resilience to crises and improving the energy efficiency of buildings, and others. The concept of the 'right to the city' expands on this by advocating for the **inclusive participation** of all urban residents (or residents of the given municipality, as the concept also applies to other types of settlements), particularly marginalised groups, in shaping and accessing the benefits of urban life. It emphasises that everyone should have a say in urban planning and development processes and that cities should be designed to meet the needs of all inhabitants, fostering accessibility and inclusiveness, social equity and collective well-being.

When it comes to **rural areas**, territorial inequalities are visible in the marginalisation of whole (micro-)regions, often associated with the so-called **development trap** – the situation when a geographical area is unable to achieve sustainable economic growth and social development despite efforts to achieve this. This stagnation may be due to various interrelated factors, such as limited labour, training and education opportunities, missing or poor infrastructure, low human capital, weak governance and other conditions that create a self-perpetuating cycle of poverty and underdevelopment. Moreover, rural areas face specific environmental challenges (such as land degradation, water scarcity, pollution, a legacy of environmental

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[4] In some Member States, the term "settlement" is often used, especially for geographically concentrated Roma populations, mainly segregated from the mainstream population. In this text, we use the term in a more general sense, denoting a community where people establish residences and infrastructure, typically encompassing villages, towns, or cities.

[5] See, e.g., research on residential segregation in Czechia by L. Sýkora.

burdens, climate change impacts, and others) and challenges related to the transition towards a climate-neutral economy.

Breaking out of the development trap requires **multisectoral policy interventions** that simultaneously address institutional, economic, social, and environmental needs. Strategic planning – which should actively involve underrepresented groups such as women or youth, whose unique challenges and perspectives need to be addressed – must aim to enhance infrastructure, promote local businesses that create jobs and increase the area's economic growth, and ensure access to quality education, healthcare, and other public services.

Expenditure on transport (needed to access services and employment) is higher in rural and remote regions. Access can be improved through the development of public transportation, with connections matching the needs of inhabitants. However, travelling to regional centres often imposes significant burdens, requiring financial resources and time and potentially conflicting with other duties. It is particularly challenging for those facing multiple disadvantages related to gender, disability, or age.

Alternatively, **online access** to services can mitigate these barriers, as well as open up new avenues to economic, civil and social empowerment, education and representation. However, this necessitates the development of robust, accessible and affordable digital infrastructure (a fast internet connection and access to devices) and relevant, user-friendly online services and resources. At the same time, the awareness of these services, confidence and digital literacy needs to be raised within marginalised populations (particular attention should be paid to including groups that face distinct barriers – such as women, youth, and inhabitants of rural and remote areas).[6] Without adequate digital literacy, Roma individuals may be unable to fully benefit from digital services, further entrenching existing inequalities.

Undocumented constructions and a lack of legal access to land, a problem particularly relevant to informal (mainly rural) segregated communities and informal accommodation, lead to insecurity of housing and exclusion from infrastructure, basic services and social support. A lack of access to drinkable water and sanitation presents a serious risk to the health of inhabitants of the latter, who already have poor access to health prevention and care. Rural marginalised communities' housing needs can be addressed by providing them with **access to land**, as ownership of individual housing is a typical housing solution in such settings. As many municipalities fail to anticipate population growth in their territorial plans, growing marginalised communities may face a situation of severe overcrowding and inadequate infrastructure. Demographic patterns and trends must be accurately reflected in territorial planning to ensure sustainable development.

The development of marginalised regions can also tackle the **negative demographic trend** associated with younger people leaving and the older population remaining, leading to challenges with neighbourhood management and public service provision. The improvement of living conditions and local opportunities can attract and retain residents, maintaining a balanced demographic structure that supports robust community services.

4. The role of local and regional actors in promoting Roma equality, inclusion and participation

Several EU Member States have implemented strategic multisectoral interventions in areas with concentrated Roma populations, sometimes described as 'integrated', 'comprehensive', or 'holistic'

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[6] On average, 55% of Roma have an internet connection for personal use when needed (38% of Roma cannot afford one). The proportion decreases to 47% for Roma living in rural areas and increases to 60% for Roma in cities, towns and suburbs. The difference is even bigger when comparing Roma living in households at risk of poverty (52%) and those who are not (71%). While there are no real differences to be seen between rural and urban areas as regards smartphone ownership (68% have one, 20% cannot afford one), only 34% of Roma in rural areas have a computer (46% cannot afford one), in comparison with 43% in cities and 42% in towns and suburbs. (FRA 2022. Roma Survey 2021. Online data visualization)

approaches. While these initiatives have yielded diverse results,[7] they also offer important lessons for future policy development. A critical analysis reveals several areas where these strategies have fallen short, particularly in addressing antigypsyism and segregation: translating centrally formulated plans, policies and objectives to the local level; leveraging EU funds effectively; and supporting local Roma civic and political participation.

One of the most significant shortcomings of the implementation of diverse programmes at the local level has been their failure to address the problems of **antigypsyism, discrimination and segregation**, the root causes of many of the challenges faced by Roma communities. Discrimination and segregation in housing and education perpetuate a cycle of exclusion and poverty, making it difficult for Roma individuals and families to access opportunities for labour market integration and social and economic mobility. By not confronting these problems directly and merely treating the symptoms of inequality without tackling the underlying issues, many programmes have had a limited effect on improving the equality, inclusion and participation of Roma. Therefore, technocratic development activities must be accompanied by efforts to raise the awareness of the local mainstream population and mediate antagonisms between different groups.

The principles of **subsidiarity and decentralisation** present opportunities and challenges for translating central policies into effective local action. The success of policy implementation at the local level depends not only on decentralisation and the mandates of diverse levels of governance but also on local political will, priorities, and capacities.

In many cases, local governments may fail to represent diverse social groups, including Roma, women and others. This underrepresentation often results in local government failing to properly address – or completely overlooking – the rights, priorities and needs of these groups in territorial planning and wider policymaking. Consequently, public services, infrastructure and development initiatives may not be inclusive or reflective of the realities faced by marginalised communities. For example, other groups' needs are prioritised over those of marginalised communities, or initiatives are irrelevant or accessible to all. Therefore, it is important to support Roma's political participation, both as active voters and as candidates for public office at the local and regional levels. Roma individuals in public office can help challenge discriminatory practices, reduce prejudice, and foster a more inclusive political culture. However, the situation that public institutions centralise all problems faced by and concerning Roma in the portfolio of a 'token Roma' officer should be avoided. This risks sidelining their concerns, as other public officials may see related issues as the sole responsibility of that individual and disengage from addressing them. For true inclusion, the responsibility for Roma equality, inclusion and participation must be shared across all levels of local governance and public administration, integrating Roma perspectives into broader planning and policy-making efforts. Instead, Roma interests should be mainstreamed into sectoral agendas (such as local development, housing, social affairs and others).

Despite the decentralisation of public administration, **the central government's role and responsibility are** pivotal in ensuring that marginalised Roma communities benefit from public investment. The former possesses diverse tools for influencing policymaking at the local level: beyond the general lawmaking that defines the boundaries and obligations of municipalities and regions, it defines the priorities and rules for diverse funding schemes on which subnational governance structures rely. By specifying the conditionalities for drawing down funds, central governments can mandate that interventions explicitly target Roma inclusion and address the interconnected challenges faced by these communities.

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[7] See, for example: Salner, A., Košťál, C., Hojsík, M. & Polačková, Z. (2013). *Lessons from Slovakia's Comprehensive Approach: Assessing the feasibility of designing and implementing integrated territorial programs targeting marginalized Roma communities*. Slovak Governance Institute.

One important lesson learnt from the previous programming period was that while **EU funding** has been a crucial opportunity for supporting Roma inclusion, many municipalities have opted to participate in calls that do not require explicit commitments to social and Roma inclusion. Typically, only specific calls (related to Roma or socially excluded localities) have required the demonstration of an inclusion effect, whereas other (mainstream) calls have lacked such conditionality. As a result, municipalities could choose easier funding options that do not prioritise or even consider the inclusion of Roma communities. This trend highlights the need for all financial incentives to include strong social and Roma inclusion conditionalities to ensure that marginalised communities and vulnerable parts of local populations also benefit from these investments.[8] It is important to systematically assess whether publicly funded (in particular, EU-funded) programmes aimed at closing the gap between Roma and non-Roma actually achieve their objectives and comply with antidiscrimination law and formulated principles of equality, inclusion, and desegregation/non-segregation.

Municipalities and other local and regional actors frequently fail to fully utilise available opportunities, such as EU funds, because of their lack of necessary **local capacity** to plan, apply for, and implement more complex projects. This is particularly the case with the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), which involves larger investments requiring longer planning, technical expertise, and financial capacity. This situation reveals the importance of not only facilitating the local absorption capacity of funding through technical assistance with project development (and, in some countries, also in implementation),[9] but also building the technical and expert capacities of local institutions and individuals. Additionally, it requires supporting collaboration and synergies between public and private (both civil society organisations and businesses) entities at different levels of governance and, above all, promoting innovative and effective problem-solving approaches that often require a change in local, traditional views about problems, approaches to them, and even the dominant mindsets of decisionmakers and local populations.

The absence of a robust civil society and critical, independent voices, such as academia and think tanks, hinders the development of new or alternative solutions and limits the accountability of local authorities. Encouraging both Roma and non-Roma individuals to **engage in civic activities** can lead to established policies and practices for the Roma population being challenged and more inclusive and equitable local governance. Therefore, central governments should support the growth of local civil society by providing resources, training, and platforms that promote civic engagement.

The **exchange of experiences and good practices** concerning all the above-mentioned areas among municipalities, regions, Member States and (potential) candidate countries can lead to valuable insights and drive the development of effective strategies for addressing Roma equality, inclusion and participation at local and regional levels.

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[8] For example, in Hungary, all municipalities that draw on EU funds must have developed "Equal Opportunities Plans" (and related action plans) covering diverse groups at risk of vulnerability, including Roma, and the proposed projects must be aligned with them.

[9] For example, since 2013 the Commission implements together with the Council of Europe the ROMACT programme which aims at supporting local stakeholders and authorities in using EU funds to improve living conditions of the most marginalised, including the Roma through assessing, planning and fundraising for the local implementation of the Roma Integration Strategies.