

Social rights for all: Roma inclusion at local level

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Report from the EURO CITIES
study visit to Timisoara
12-14 June 2018

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Executive summary

EUROCITIES organised a study visit to Timisoara on 12-14 June 2018 as part of its mutual learning programme for cities working on Roma inclusion at local level. The visit was part of a broader EUROCITIES project funded by the EU Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI), which supports cities to reduce poverty and foster social inclusion at local level.

Timisoara has a large Roma community of approximately 3,000 people who are identified as being at the highest risk of poverty and social exclusion. Following the framework set by the National Strategy for inclusion of Roma minorities for 2015-2020, Timisoara launched a local action plan in 2018. The plan includes an array of actions to address Roma inclusion, ranging from preventing early school leaving and holding job fairs for Roma job seekers to hiring health and school mediators and hosting cultural activities. Roma people are consulted and involved in all actions through the Grupul de Initiativa Locala (GIL; Local Roma Initiative Group). The social services department coordinates the broad scale action plan with the support of other departments, institutions and NGOs, including public and private social services providers, public employment services, the education inspectorate and the health department. These stakeholders form the Grupul Local de Lucru (GLL; Local Working Group for Roma), which meets regularly to discuss progress on actions.

The study visit was hosted by the social services department of Timisoara under the patronage of the deputy mayor for social affairs, Imre Farkas. A EUROCITIES delegation of 10 experts from five cities – Budapest, Cluj-Napoca, Ghent, Glasgow, and Gothenburg – and a delegate from the European Commission’s directorate general for employment social affairs and inclusion (DG EMPL) gave their feedback on the host city’s action plan for Roma inclusion. They also advised Timisoara on how to further improve its local plan in the coming years, both in terms of planning as well as implementation.

The study visit followed the EUROCITIES ‘critical friend review’ method. Visiting city experts acted as ‘critical friends’ by providing constructive feedback to the host city. The experts gained insight through four site visits, four presentations and three days of dialogue with the host city, after which they identified the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the city’s local action plan for Roma inclusion. The study visit put city experts on equal footing and offered safe space for exchange. This environment led to effective mutual learning and open discussion based on trust and respect.

The study visit concluded that Timisoara has already achieved positive results with its Roma inclusion action plan, but there is room for improvement in some areas. The critical friends encouraged a number of follow-up actions, including:

- establishing a longer term action plan based on a comprehensive needs assessment and Roma involvement
- securing broad political commitment for an integrated approach beyond just social services
- assisting Roma people to obtain permanent identity cards for better access to public services
- supporting labour market integration of Roma people, including those with prior criminal records
- improving law enforcement around compulsory school attendance to prevent dropout among Roma youth
- tackling the shortage of affordable housing and the Roma people's lack of property rights
- improving outreach capacity for fieldwork in the Roma community, which requires more resources

The three days of site visits, workshops and discussions generated constructive feedback for Timisoara. By engaging with the visiting cities, Timisoara received input on a number of its programmes and policies and, in turn, the city committed to several initiatives to strengthen its Roma inclusion action plan for 2019. This mentoring study visit has proven the added value of mutual learning between peer cities. The critical friend method again demonstrated its effectiveness when it comes to building local authorities' capacity to improve policies and practices for local communities.



Introduction

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1.1 EUROCITIES WORK ON ROMA INCLUSION AT LOCAL LEVEL

EUROCITIES is committed to fighting discrimination against Europe's biggest minority, Roma people, and foster their social inclusion. The network's working group on Roma inclusion brings together 55 cities from across Europe to work towards improving local level policies for poverty reduction and social inclusion to meet the needs of Roma communities. Through exchanging knowledge and sharing experiences on Roma inclusion, city authorities learn how to transfer effective policies, replicate good practices and achieve policy change that leads to better living conditions for Roma people.

Our mission is to build cities' capacity to strengthen local policies and practices for Roma inclusion. To achieve this, we organise mutual learning activities, such as study visits, to bring cities together to learn from one another. The activities focus on ensuring meaningful Roma participation; improving Roma access to education, employment, housing, healthcare; and eliminating discrimination in access to services. We follow the principles and guidelines set out in the **EUROCITIES statement on Roma inclusion in cities**.¹ In all our work, we seek to:

- consult and involve Roma people directly in our work
- build east-west cooperation between cities in Europe
- adopt integrated approaches to Roma inclusion
- address both 'domestic' Roma in origin cities and 'migrant' Roma in destination cities
- support cities' access to EU funding to help improve their policies on Roma inclusion.

We continuously build knowledge on Roma inclusion in European cities. In 2017, we **mapped the situation of Roma inclusion in cities in Europe**.² The initiative analysed the challenges Roma face, how cities respond to them, what initiatives they put in place and how they engage with Roma. In 2018, EUROCITIES collected **lessons learned from cities with the European Social Fund in 2014-2017**,³ including ESF projects on Roma inclusion.

A key focus of the working group is to raise awareness on city authorities' vital role of in the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies. We collaborate with the European Commission and European Parliament as well as with the Council of Europe, the Fundamental Rights Agency and many EU civil society NGOs. Together, we assemble evidence from cities to inform EU policy making in the field of Roma inclusion. We contribute to the annual assessment of the implementation of the EU Roma framework, and we participated in the midterm evaluation in 2018. We are key stakeholders bringing the voice of city authorities to EU events on Roma policy, such as EU Roma Week and the European Platform for Roma inclusion. Through the Urban Agenda for the EU, EUROCITIES works in partnership with cities, regions, member states and EU institutions to develop joint solutions to tackle urban poverty by developing an **action plan**⁴ that addresses Roma poverty explicitly alongside three other priorities: tackling homelessness, eliminating child poverty and regenerating deprived urban neighbourhoods.

Our work on Roma inclusion is part of a broader EUROCITIES project funded by EaSI, which supports cities with poverty reduction and social inclusion at local level and takes an active role in the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. The project runs from 2018-2021 and includes data collection, mutual learning, capacity building and the dissemination of cities' good practices.

¹ <http://bit.ly/2QQEC2E>

² <https://bit.ly/2GhKJVy>

³ <http://bit.ly/2zV3nkt>

⁴ <https://bit.ly/2xySnaE>

1.2 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY VISIT TO TIMISOARA

The idea of a study visit to Timisoara came from the city's request for feedback and advice from peer cities on its 2018 local action plan for Roma inclusion. The EUROCITIES working group on Roma inclusion welcomed the request, which provided a good opportunity to strengthen east-west cooperation of cities on Roma inclusion through a targeted activity for capacity building and mutual learning.

In response, EUROCITIES organised a study visit with 10 experts from Budapest, Cluj-Napoca, Ghent, Glasgow and Gothenburg alongside two representatives from EUROCITIES and a delegate from the European Commission (DG EMPL). The three day study visit took place under the patronage of the deputy mayor for social affairs, Imre Farkas, and was hosted by Timisoara's social services department led by its director, Rodica Surducu. Eight other social workers actively participated in all activities of the study visit while the entire department took part in some activities like networking during the cultural programme. Among them, the Roma mediator (of Roma ethnicity) who works with the Roma community on a daily basis provided valuable contributions to all sessions, taking on the role of 'reality checker' to anchor the discussions in the reality of Roma people living in Timisoara.

During the three days of meetings, presentations and site visits, there was broad participation of Roma people and local organisations working with the community:

- the president of the Local Roma Initiative Group and other Roma representatives
- NGOs working with Roma children and young adults (e.g. Potter's House social centre, United Way Romania)
- school leaders, teachers and educators working with Roma pupils and their families
- public employment services working with Roma for integration in the labour market
- other local institutions implementing actions for Roma inclusion under the local plan
- city councillors in charge of policy areas which impact Roma inclusion, and
- over 100 people from the Roma community who participated in the cultural programme

The objectives of the study visit were to:

Learn about the situation of Roma people in Timisoara

to understand the challenges they face and their difficulties accessing the services available to them. The goal was to improve the visiting cities' knowledge and understanding of the Roma situation in the 'origin' city to understand these communities in the 'destination cities' to which Roma immigrate. The exchange enabled them to tailor their own measures and services to integrate Roma coming from this part of Romania.

Provide guidance to the host city, as well as its institutions, services and partners, on how to improve the local action plan for Roma inclusion for 2019 and beyond.

The visiting cities aimed to identify what works well and should be built upon and what could be done differently or improved. With this feedback, the host city can build its capacity through increased know-how of what works for Roma inclusion in other cities and what elements could be transferred and adapted to the context in Timisoara.

Support follow-up actions and building city-to-city partnerships to apply for jointly funded EU projects.

To help address the host city's needs for additional capacity, the peer reviewers sought to provide know-how of EU funding opportunities available to cities and how to apply. They offered to collaborate in future joint EU projects, leading to new partnerships on Roma inclusion between EU cities in the east and west.



Background and policy context

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2.1 NATIONAL ROMA INTEGRATION STRATEGY OF ROMANIA

In response to the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies 2011-2020, Romania adopted a new **National Strategy for the Inclusion of Romanian citizens belonging to the Roma ethnic minority for the period 2014-2020**.⁵ The programme builds on the previous 'national strategy for improving the situation of Roma people in 2001-2010'. The new strategy was adopted in January 2015, three years after other member states adopted theirs. The driving factor behind this new strategy was, however, not the policy framework at EU level, but rather the ex-ante conditionality to access EU cohesion funds for 2014-2020 that required Romania to enact a national Roma integration strategy to access funding.

To improve the situation and living standards of Roma people in Romania, the national strategy calls for an integrated approach with actions in six areas of intervention:

1. Education: reduce school dropout rates, early school leaving and illiteracy

2. Employment: encourage vocational training, provide active support to access work and create incentives for employers to hire Roma

3. Access to healthcare: set up community centres at local level to monitor health needs

4. Housing: support projects for building and renovating social housing with basic services

5. Culture: preserve, develop and promote Roma culture including language, history and customs

6. Social services: ensure the Roma population has access to services including child protection, community development and protection of human rights

The strategy targets Roma citizens but does not exclude other groups at risk of exclusion. The responsibility for implementing the strategy rests with national and local public authorities working in partnership with Roma and civil society at all stages of public intervention, especially at local level. The strategy calls for building the capacity of local authorities in three of the six areas: health to develop local health monitoring plans, housing to develop social housing infrastructure and urban regeneration programmes, and social services to train staff in local public administration to offer non-discriminatory services and equal access to Roma.

Snapshot of the situation of Roma people in Romania presented in the national strategy

There are 621,573 self-declared Roma people in Romania based on census data from 2011. This represents 3.3% of the country's population. Other estimations from the World Bank and the Council of Europe indicate that the total number of Roma people is over one million.

- **Education:** 90% has low or no education (20% has no education, 34.2% completed only primary level and 35.7% lower-secondary); 9.2% has a vocational qualification, and 0.7% has completed higher education. The big gap in education levels of Roma and non-Roma is evident in the rates of illiteracy (14.1% for Roma compared to 1% for non-Roma).
- **Employment:** 48.6% of Roma are unemployed, and only 36.3% has employment, of which just 10% has had stable work over the past two years. The risk of poverty among Roma is about four times higher than the average among Romanian population.
- **Health:** The life expectancy among Roma is six years less than among non-Roma.
- **Housing:** 30% of Roma live in inadequate housing, only 13% has access to electricity and 18% to water. A third is at risk of eviction due to lack of property or rental contracts.

⁵ <https://bit.ly/2e9Vu0s>



2.2 TIMISOARA'S LOCAL ACTION PLAN FOR ROMA INCLUSION

In response to the national strategy for Roma inclusion adopted in 2015, Timisoara developed a **Local Action Plan for Inclusion of People from Roma ethnic minority**,⁶ which was officially adopted in 2018 (decision no. 534/2017 by Timisoara city council). The plan outlines the measures Timisoara will implement for Roma inclusion during 2018. The social services department of Timisoara developed the plan based on a public consultation with other public services and institutions, local partners, NGOs and Roma civil society. The plan is to be renewed annually with new or improved measures for each following year.

Areas of intervention

Timisoara's local action plan for Roma inclusion set six priority areas, which are the same as those set out in the national strategy for Roma inclusion:

- 1. Education:** support enrolment and participation in compulsory education from an early age, reduce illiteracy among adults via second-chance programmes, parent counselling, training teachers and educators on inclusive education, cultural diversity and mediation
- 2. Employment:** hold job fairs for Roma job seekers, create partnerships with local employers to hire Roma, provide vocational counselling and mediation services and launch information campaigns
- 3. Health:** recruit and train a health mediator, promote healthy lifestyles and prevent risky behaviours through information campaigns, increase vaccination rates and teach health education
- 4. Housing:** develop projects for the urban regeneration of deprived areas with support from EU cohesion funds; fundraising by NGOs to improve precarious housing conditions
- 5. Culture:** facilitate Roma access to cultural events at local level, promote Roma music and traditions through a dedicated festival and ensure cultural representation of Roma

- 6. Social services:** develop services to prevent child separation from families; run campaigns to inform Roma about human rights and fundamental freedoms; roll out programmes to identify and address cases of discrimination against Roma; support Roma to register and obtain identification documents; and launch a social dialogue process with Roma NGOs

The local action plan defines activities to be put into action in 2018. Each measure is detailed in terms of objectives, activities, responsible entity, deadlines, financing sources and indicators to measure progress. The social services department is involved in 31 actions.

Actors involved

Timisoara's local action plan includes a wide range of measures that mainstream Roma inclusion across various municipal and county departments:

- the municipal social services department coordinates and oversees the action plan
- the education inspectorate of the county (regional body reporting to the national government)
- the public employment agency of the county (regional body reporting to the national government)
- the public health department of the county (regional body reporting to the national government)
- the city department for urban planning
- the cultural house and intercultural institute
- child protection services
- NGOs and foundations (Chosen Romania, United Way, Roma Women Association for Our Children)
- local police
- county police

The city also established two advisory bodies to coordinate and monitor progress on the city's local action plan:

GLL – the 'Grupul Local de Lucru' (Local Working Group) gathers representatives of all services, organisations and stakeholders involved in any of the actions of the local plan

GIL – the 'Grupul de Initiativa Locala' (Local Initiative Group) is made up of representatives of the Roma community.

These consultative bodies meet regularly to discuss progress on the action plan and its initiatives.

⁶ <https://bit.ly/2B8wkcM>

Roma participation

Roma people are involved in the design and delivery of the action plan through the GIL, supported by the social services department which provides space for its meetings. GIL has a democratic structure with an elected president. It takes ownership over a set of actions to promote and stimulate Roma participation. One of the group's key focuses is to stimulate the involvement of more Roma representatives and NGOs in GIL and to support members to develop municipally funded projects that contribute to implementing the action plan.

Timisoara's action plan also foresees elected leaders from each neighbourhood to communicate the specific problems faced by the Roma community in that area to GIL. Additionally, the social services department employed a Roma mediator to work directly with the Roma community, especially with GIL and the neighbourhood leaders.

2.3 OTHER ACTIONS OF TIMISOARA FOR ROMA INCLUSION

Improving the living conditions of Roma people is part of Timisoara's broader strategy for social inclusion for all people living in (extreme) poverty. This means that in addition to the measures targeted at the Roma community through the local action plan for Roma inclusion, Roma people also benefit from the mainstream measures for inclusion and poverty reduction regardless of their ethnicity.

1. Social survey and poverty maps in the most deprived areas of the city

A social survey is currently ongoing in Timisoara. In parallel, the social services department is running a data collection exercise to map the poverty and social exclusion in three of the most deprived areas where Roma live. This project follows the methodology of poverty maps in the **World Bank atlas of urban marginalised areas in Romania**.⁷ The methodology was adopted to identify and collect data on demographic trends, education level, employment history and social benefits. The data will be compared to the social survey results to identify key challenges and needs specific to Roma, to inform future inclusion measures and tailor social services to the needs of Roma people.

2. URBIInclusion

Timisoara also takes part in the **URBIInclusion project**,⁸ part of URBACT III, in 2017-2019. This project aims to reduce urban poverty in the deprived area of Kuncz through integrated actions including social services, urban planning, education and employment services and creating new solutions by involving the local community, many of whom are Roma. The first step was to set up a local action group and develop an action plan. Next, one of the actions planned is to set up a multifunctional community centre for all ages from children and youth (to prevent early school leaving) with activities for adults and elderly.

⁷ <https://bit.ly/2Pv3p7H>

⁸ <http://bit.ly/2rzp854>



Critical friend review methodology

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The study visit to Timisoara followed the ‘critical friend review’ method to:

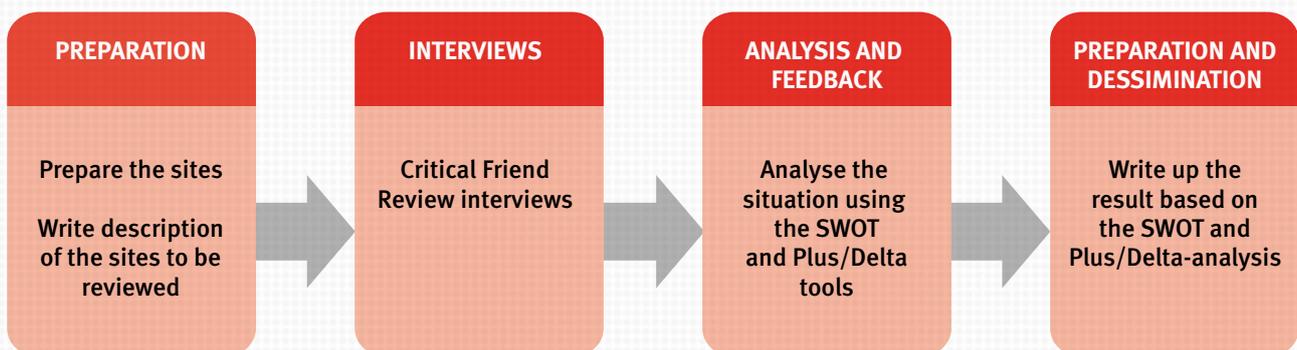
- provide guidance to the host city and its institutions, services and partners
- identify common learning and analysis between participating cities
- learn with others and support actions to be taken across cities

The critical friend review is a methodology for peer review between cities. It brings together a group of selected city experts who act as peer reviewers and provide guidance to the host city, related institutions and partners. It is different from a standard peer review because the focus is not only on the *outcome* of the critical review but also on the *process* of mutual learning. The aim is to create a safe space for city experts to exchange as equals in an open discussion based on mutual trust and respect, leading to ‘friendly’ feedback.

The visiting city experts act as ‘critical friends’ to learn about the policy or practice in detail and identify its strengths, weaknesses, elements that should be kept and built upon and those that need to be improved or complemented with new actions, measures or services. Through mutual learning, the host and critical friends identify common themes by analysing trends, obstacles and challenges. Together, they develop action plans that can be used across cities. The critical friend review culminates with the host city making concrete commitments on follow-up actions and participating cities committing to further cooperation and partnership.

The critical friend review in Timisoara focused on the city’s local action plan for the inclusion of Roma minorities in 2018 and what to improve in 2019. To accomplish this, the host city and visiting cities followed the step-by-step critical friend review process, as explained below.

Figure 1. Sequential steps in the critical friend review



Step 1: Preparation before the study visit

The EUROCITIES working group on Roma inclusion opened a call to its members, from which it selected a group of city practitioners with experience on Roma inclusion plans at local level. The working group paid close attention to the geographic representation of cities to cover both perspectives from western and eastern European cities. Finally, three cities from the west (Ghent, Glasgow and

Gothenburg) and two from east of Europe (Budapest and Cluj-Napoca) sent delegates with experience working with Roma people from Romania.

The delegates prepared ahead of the study visit to acquire some basic knowledge of the Timisoara action plan. The host city facilitated their preparation with a background note to explain the policy context and some guiding questions to highlight where feedback is most needed.

Step 2: Presenting the context and overview of the topic to kick off the study visit



On the first day of the study visit, the host city presented the policy context for Roma inclusion in Romania and Timisoara's action plan, which was adopted in early 2018. Representatives from the Roma community and civil society and organisations working with Roma people presented examples and success stories of good practice projects for Roma inclusion. A panel debate with city councillors offered the opportunity to exchange on the topic. This insight provided the critical friends with a sound understanding of the context and the measures already in place for Roma inclusion at local level, and some different perspectives on current policy gaps.

Step 3: On-site visits and interviews

The core activities of the review are the on-site visits and interviews with local practitioners, organisations and beneficiaries of the services and projects the group visited. The visits took place on the second day when the critical friends toured four sites that host projects for Roma inclusion.

Visit 1 to the Kuncz neighbourhood.

The Kuncz neighbourhood is one of the most deprived areas in Timisoara. Of its 2,000 inhabitants, more than half (54%) are of Roma ethnicity. The neighbourhood has poor physical infrastructure with badly maintained roads and streets, no green areas, no educational or cultural or social infrastructure and inadequate housing with no water, gas or heating facilities. The neighbourhood is one of the priority areas for implementing the actions of the local Roma inclusion plan. The critical friends from the visiting cities split into three groups to visit three Roma households in this neighbourhood.

Visit 2 to the 'Potter's House'.

The Potter's House is a social daycare centre for children from families living in poverty. The centre is managed by an NGO called Chosen Foundation, which works with volunteers that carry out non-formal learning activities for children of different ages, such as craft workshops, reading, cooking and painting. By developing their skills and self-confidence, children are prepared for vocational training to overcome the risk of school dropout and keep them away from illegal activities in the street. The centre provides daily meals, after school activities, psychological counselling, vocational counselling and medical services. It offers its services based on a lifecycle approach and continues mentoring support after young people turn 18 and then as they become parents and send their own children to the centre. Since 2000 when it was established, this social centre has helped 250 children and their families, both Roma and non-Roma. In 2018, Timisoara allocated €55,650 from the local budget and daily meals to support the centre's activities, which coincide with some actions in the Roma inclusion plan of the city.



Visit 3 to secondary school number 15.

This school hosts the ‘Learn to Succeed’ project of United Way Romania, financed through fundraising from private enterprises. The project aims to prevent students from dropping out by offering after school activities to children at risk of marginalisation in the Fratelia and Iosefin neighbourhoods. A total of 48 children and 15 teachers are involved in the project. The project also works in parallel with vocational guidance and counselling services for parents. The critical friends had the chance to personally meet a group of mothers participating in a 12 week course for family counselling focused on empowering mothers to know their rights and how ensuring their children’s wellbeing.



Visit 4 to the homeless centre.

This visit was added to the programme due to its relevance to the Roma inclusion process. The homeless centre provides integrated services and rehabilitation plans for homeless people, including shelter, food, health check-ups, social work and support for entering the labour market and obtaining retirement benefits. A personalised plan is developed together with each person to ensure the sustainability of the plans. The centre has a residential area with 55 places where homeless people can stay up to two years, an emergency shelter with 20 more places for temporary stays and a social canteen active 24/7 to provide warm meals to 1,000 people each day.

Step 4: Analysis and formulation of feedback by the critical friends

After the site visits, the critical friends gathered without the host city to discuss their findings. As a group, they worked together to complete a SWOT analysis to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the Roma inclusion action plan of the host city.

After they discussed and agreed upon the findings from the SWOT analysis, the critical friends completed a plus/delta analysis to distinguish between what is going well and should be kept or built upon based on the strengths identified, and what could be improved or done differently. They formulated suggestions on how to turn the weaknesses into potential opportunities, make the most of the current successes and avoid possible threats.

Step 5: Reporting the feedback to the host city and disseminating the findings

During the third and final day, the critical friends gave their feedback to the host city, offering advice and making suggestions based on their analysis. The host city responded to the feedback, engaging in a discussion with the critical friends on what could be done better or improved. Based on the feedback and the discussion, the host city and the critical friends formulated concrete actions for the short, medium and long term.

After the study visit is over, EURO CITIES together with the host city reports on the outcomes of the critical friend review and disseminates the findings widely. The host city may carry out debriefings with their services and local partners to inform them about the findings and plan follow-up actions. A meeting to assess the progress may be held one year later.



Key findings

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4.1 SITUATION OF ROMA PEOPLE IN TIMISOARA

Timisoara is a city of over 320,000 inhabitants, of which 3,000 are estimated to belong to the Roma ethnic minority (Romanian citizens of Roma ethnic origin). Roma communities are spread across the city, but they are concentrated in the three most deprived neighbourhoods of the city. The findings from the mapping of the most deprived areas in Timisoara found that:

- 54% of people living in Kuncz neighbourhood are Roma
- 14% in Polona area
- 3% in Ronat area

Based on the discussions we had with Roma families during our on-site visit to Kuncz, we identified the following key challenges that Roma face to break the cycle of poverty and exclusion:



PROBLEM 1: No permanent identity cards due to lack of recognised address of residence and no property rights to the land where they live.

To obtain an ID in Romania, which is a precondition to access any public service, citizens need to submit proof of their permanent address of residence. Due to the complex process of transition from state property to individual property after the fall of the communist regime, many Roma living in the Kuncz area could not prove their land property rights. In many cases, the houses belonged to their families for several generations; some missed the deadline to submit the proper documents, and others are still in lawsuits. This means that while the houses belong to Roma people, the land is still state property under the administration of national government. While Roma citizens are tolerated to live on the land, they do not have legal rights and cannot prove their address of residence, prohibiting them from obtaining permanent IDs. To address this issue, the social services department helps Roma to get temporary IDs that need to be renewed annually. While it is not a permanent solution, it allows Roma and other persons in extreme poverty to get access to public services such as education, healthcare and welfare benefits.



PROBLEM 2: Difficulties entering the labour market.

Timisoara has a very low unemployment rate with many employers and large multinational companies looking for staff to fill job vacancies. Despite the employment opportunities in the local labour market, the rates of long term unemployment among Roma are much higher than the average population. Some Roma face difficulties in getting a job because of past criminal records, which can be 'traced' by recruiters who often prefer not to hire people with past convictions. There are also other discriminatory practices by employers stemming from some mistrust of Roma. Despite the discrimination, there are many Roma in Kuncz who have jobs, but these are often temporary and low paid jobs due to lack of education and qualification. Many working Roma simply cannot make ends meet given the increasingly high cost of living in Timisoara. Therefore, some families prefer to rely on social benefits and children's allowance, supplementing those benefits with petty work on the black market rather than working for a low salary. Other families decide to emigrate to western EU countries like Germany, where they can work in construction and provide a better life for their children.

After the visit to Kuncz area, the delegation visited a school and a social centre. They interviewed teachers and educators, revealing another key challenge to Roma inclusion:



PROBLEM 3: Prevalent school dropout.

Rates of early school leaving are very high among Roma pupils. Many students drop out before completing lower secondary education. There are three main identifiable causes of the issue. The first is the high truancy and absenteeism levels among Roma pupils. Even if school is mandatory until age 16, the law is not strictly enforced. Roma parents would like teachers to be stricter in requiring regular attendance to class, referring specifically to the strict monitoring of school attendance in Western countries. However, teachers say they do not have sufficient tools or means to monitor the situation or inform the authorities. They cannot involve social workers to discuss these issues with concerned families.



A second problem is related to logistics and the cost of transport to schools. For example, there is no school in Kuncz, where many Roma live. This means the children must walk or take public transport to the nearest school. Thirdly, there are cultural issues. School dropout disproportionality affects more girls than boys and much earlier in school. In some Roma communities, fathers prohibit their daughters to continue education past primary school for fear that they will be kidnapped for forced marriages (there have been cases reported). Teachers and school leaders have no real means to prevent dropout.

We also could identify an overarching challenge:



PROBLEM 4: Mistrust of Roma towards public authorities.

In all our discussions with Roma families, it became clear that they do not trust public authorities to come up with solutions to their socio-economic problems. While they do trust the Roma mediator, considering him ‘one of theirs’, they think he alone cannot bring about change in their communities. And while many Roma, particularly women and youth, participate in community projects and consultations, they perceive these efforts as top-down. Also, they are not always aware of the organising entity behind the activities, which means that they do not see the visible role of the local administration in their lives. Adding to the lack of visibility, there is also the matter of access to public services, which are located in the city centre with no office or mobile services in the areas where Roma live. It will take time and a more visible presence of the social services where Roma live before a trust based dialogue can be built and sustained; the local action plan can be more effective if it engages Roma from the beginning.

4.2 STRENGTHS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Timisoara has already achieved some positive results with the implementation of its local action plan for Roma inclusion in 2018. Based on the SWOT analysis during the study visit, the critical friends identified the following strengths and opportunities.



Structures already put in place for dialogue and consultation.

A Local Working Group with delegates from all relevant municipal services, county services and NGOs was set up to coordinate the implementation

of the Roma inclusion plan. While it is now in place, efforts should continue to use this working group for developing coordinated solutions and a shared responsibility to support Roma inclusion in the city. Additionally, a Local Roma Initiative Group with representatives from Roma communities and civil society is also in place but needs to be strengthened to become fully operational and work independently.



Strong leadership and commitment by the social services.

After the restructuring of social services in 2017 and the arrival of the new director, Rodica Surducun, the work on Roma inclusion gained momentum with the 2018 Roma inclusion action plan. The director’s strong commitment and the dedication of her team are great assets for the work on Roma inclusion plan. Their efforts drive better cooperation with other services in charge of employment, health and urban planning, and they have gained the respect and appreciation of the deputy mayor of social affairs. These factors have the potential to attract more political will to the cause of Roma inclusion at local level. To build on this potential, the director of social services should seek to involve politicians in the actions. At the same time, balancing the top-down leadership with bottom-up empowerment of social workers in the service is the next step for building capacity at an institutional level.



Strong engagement of community-based NGOs and volunteers.

There is a wide and strong network of NGOs and foundations with very committed volunteers (often unpaid) who work with disadvantaged families, many of whom are from Roma communities. NGOs fill a gap in public service provision at local level for the most vulnerable citizens by offering a wide range of assistance: daily meals, collecting second hand toys and clothes, vocational counselling, psychological support, health monitoring and guidance to access mainstream services or legal advice. By integrating the services and activities of some of these NGOs within the Roma inclusion plan, the local authority can provide some financial support to these NGOs and help improve their work to benefit more Roma people in need. This is the case of the Potter’s House social centre, which is directly supported by the social services’ budget. The next step would be to use the vast knowledge and expertise of these NGOs by involving them in the design of new and improved measures for the social inclusion of Roma people.



Openness of the young Roma.

Most of the Roma people we met in Timisoara were open and motivated to improve their community and engage in a dialogue with the local authorities. Their enthusiasm represents a very good opportunity especially as the young Roma tend to be better educated, have better access to digital information and are more open to explore what the world can offer them, both in Romania as well as abroad. To maximise this potential, more focus needs to be placed on promoting role models.



New data on Roma situation.

The two data collection exercises currently ongoing – the social survey of the population in Timisoara and the poverty mapping of the most deprived areas – will give valuable evidence of the challenges and needs at local level. The studies will serve as the foundation for evidence based policies for social inclusion in the city. Next, the social services leadership should make the most of this evidence to develop new targeted measures or adapt and mainstream services as needed to respond to the needs in each community. This should be the starting point of the Roma inclusion plan in 2019.

Among the many actions of the Roma inclusion plan that already have been implemented, some are already bearing fruit. Three successes are notable and should be continued in the following years:

SUCCESS 1: Job fairs for Roma job seekers.

In direct cooperation with the county public employment services and local businesses, the social services department organised a job fair dedicated to job seekers who are primarily unqualified and low skilled. The event targeted mainly but not exclusively Roma people. A total of ten companies presented over 400 job vacancies. Eighty-nine Roma people attended the job fair, of which 20% of them obtained a job contract. Based on this success, there are plans to continue to organise other job fairs in other areas.

SUCCESS 2: Counselling for Roma women empowerment.

A family counselling course was organised for mothers whose children attended after school activities as part of the ‘learn to succeed’ project at general school 15 with support from the United Way Romania foundation. After 12 weekly sessions of group counselling with the mothers, the results clearly showed how much it helped women become aware of their rights and how to ensure the wellbeing of their children. The change in mindset was evident in how the women felt more independent and empowered thanks to a new perspective on their life.

Testimony from one of the Roma mothers we interviewed at the site visit:

“I admit that this programme made me learn how to be independent and to have time for myself. It helped me improve the relations within my family and especially with my children. I now allocate a bit of time for myself each week, and I meet some other mothers from this group to encourage each other to practice what we learned”.

SUCCESS 3: Social ambulance.

The social ambulance is a service offered by the homeless centre. It is an ambulance to reach out to people in need on the street, such as the homeless, drug addicts, unaccompanied minors and people with mental or physical health problems. The social ambulance gives assistance tailored to people specific needs, such as hosting them in the emergency shelter of the homeless centre, providing them with a warm meal, conducting a health check-up or giving guidance on other specialised services in the city. The service monitors the areas with the highest risk to make it quicker and easier to find and help those in need.

4.3 CHALLENGES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

The critical friend review identified some areas where there is still room for improvement:

- **Giving Roma people access to permanent IDs.**

Helping Roma people in Kuncz to get temporary identity cards that last for one year is a temporary solution, but it is not sustainable. When their ID expires, they are again left without access to basic public services. The barrier to getting a permanent ID is the lack of proof of a permanent residence address. While regularisation of housing or land property rights goes beyond the competence of the municipality, what can be done at local level is to establish a common generic address for the entire neighbourhood of Kuncz. This has been piloted in Copenhagen and proven successful. With a common address for Kuncz, people living there could finally obtain a permanent identity card that grants them the same citizenship, social rights and responsibilities as any other citizen in Romania.

- **Need for investment in social and affordable housing.**

The stock of public social housing in Timisoara is very limited (under 10%), but the demand is on the rise. Roma people in Timisoara do not live in camps or on the streets but in decent housing. However, the land they occupy, in the case of many families in Kuncz, is state-owned. While there is no immediate risk of eviction, the state has already sold some plots of unused land in the neighbourhood to private investors for factory buildings. The need for social housing is also increasing from demand among non-Roma citizens living at risk of poverty. Investment in social and affordable housing is a means to achieving mainstream social inclusion. It is not an easy fix but takes long term investment, broad political will and a vision for the future. Fortunately, Timisoara recently won a European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) grant for the regeneration of deprived neighbourhoods (ERDF funding with community local-led development initiative), which is a good basis to build long term strategic cooperation between social services and urban planning. Critical friends also recommended exploring a collaboration with the NGO Habitat for Humanity to support quick building of affordable housing units, such as container homes, or renovation of older, substandard houses.

- **Support Roma people to enter the labour market.**

Social services should continue to work with the public employment agency to tackle potential discrimination by employers towards people with former criminal records. The municipality should also develop targeted incentives for employers to hire Roma through partnership agreements and memoranda of understanding that commit employers to offer on-the-job training to newly hired Roma. To compensate for the low salaries offered to the unqualified and unskilled, the municipality could include social clauses in public procurement to encourage contractors to offer meal vouchers, eco-vouchers and other such non-taxed benefits to improve incentives and attract more people currently on welfare to take up a job.

- **Focus on tackling school dropout.**

School is mandatory until age 16, and there should be no discrimination in how this law is enforced. School attendance of Roma pupils should be closely and strictly monitored. A system could be put in place to raise a risk-of-dropout alert for repeated absenteeism. School principals should have a direct contact in the social services department, who in turn, should activate an integrated team of professionals (social workers, psychologists, doctors and even police if necessary) to discuss the issue

with students' families. Another measure is to enforce the law of school attendance as a precondition to accessing social welfare benefits. Women empowerment initiatives should also be continued and strengthened to this end.

All these areas for improvement go beyond what can be achieved with the one year action plan. Given the scale and multi-dimensional nature of the challenges, the critical friends recommended a multi-annual action plan with some improved processes:

Figure 2. Elements for an effective Roma inclusion strategy



1. **A three year action plan.**

While the local action plan for 2018 is a good starting point, the next action plan should be built on a longer timeframe to enable complex measures that go beyond one-off activities and lead to more sustainable results for inclusion.

2. **Based on evidence and a comprehensive needs assessment.**

The long term plan should be based on a thorough needs assessment from the evidence collected from the mapping in Kuncz and compared to the results of the social survey in the city. This should offer a good baseline of the current situation of Roma people in Timisoara, to which the city can compare the results of actions from the Roma inclusion plan. This would allow the municipality to determine the effectiveness of intervention and adjust the plan as needed.

3. Meaningful Roma participation at all stages of the action plan

The local action plan is, first and foremost, for Roma people's inclusion; therefore, it must be built *with* Roma not only *for* Roma, and the final aim should be to get it done *by* Roma. A process of dialogue should be set up to consult and involve the Roma community, stakeholders and NGOs to gain their trust. They should participate in society not only as passive beneficiaries but as resourceful agents of change in the community. To make this possible, Roma must be engaged from the very beginning in the design and elaboration of the action plan and throughout its implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Building on achievements so far, the social services department should further strengthen the capacity of the Local Roma Initiative Group. It must engage the group as an equal partner in a structured dialogue to build the next action plan with a genuine participatory, bottom-up approach.

4. Clear focus on an integrated approach with strong involvement of other relevant services.

Roma inclusion needs a coordinated effort across many areas of intervention (education, healthcare, employment and housing) to achieve positive change. It is thus essential to fully and formally involve all relevant municipal and county departments to achieve a truly integrated Roma inclusion plan at local level. Despite great efforts, the social services department cannot do it alone and must secure the effort and commitment from other city departments. The Local Working Group already in place should be involved from early on to develop and deliver the next action plan.

5. Increased capacity to improve outreach by social workers.

Building Roma's trust towards local authorities requires time and effort. Currently, only one Roma mediator works directly with Roma people in the community, while social workers in the social services department address different issues including social benefits, child protection and disabled persons. Having more social workers involved in street outreach activities and speaking regularly to Roma families would not only lead to better relationships between Roma people and local authorities but also recognise social problems early on and help find solutions. However, resources for the social services department are very limited. As a first step, the department should take stock of available resources and identify any gaps. The critical friends offered their support to involve Timisoara in joint EU-funded projects, such as ROMACT and URBACT.

6. Political support from the city council.

To implement an integrated action plan effectively, more resources are needed. To increase the social services budget in Timisoara, broad political commitment is required from the mayor and the city council. The deputy mayor for social affairs could facilitate this political support as a major catalyst. However, Roma inclusion is quite a divisive subject in Romanian society. The social services department should commit to raising awareness at the local level around the stark contrast between Roma and non-Roma citizens. They must focus on getting more media coverage of the good practices and success stories of Roma inclusion. A change in mindset and public opinion could trigger more political will.



Conclusions and follow-up actions

5

The critical friend review concluded that some positive results are already visible thanks to the 2018 Roma inclusion action plan. While these efforts are a good foundation, a longer, three year plan is recommended for achieving more sustainable results. The experts advocated for an integrated approach to Roma inclusion, with a strong commitment not only from the social services but also from all relevant services and municipal departments. It requires strong political will from the mayor and the city council. The future action plan for 2019 and beyond should be built on a participatory, bottom-up approach with the involvement of NGOs and the Roma community. It should also be fully grounded in an evidence-based needs assessment.

Timisoara's director for social services, who hosted the study visit, welcomed the feedback and committed to the critical friend suggestions with some immediate actions:

- **Setting up a three year strategy in addition to the one year action plan.**

This strategy will be developed before the end of 2018 based on the evidence from all data collected and the mapping analysis with a key focus on education, employment, housing and healthcare. The municipality has already applied for an EEA/Norway grant to get financial support for purchasing container homes. These efforts will help fight homelessness and build two community centres with activities and services for youth, adults and the elderly.

- **Solving the identity card issue with a common generic address.**

The director of social services committed to working with the urban planning department to explore the option of establishing a generic address for the entire neighbourhood of Kuncz (the Copenhagen model). This would create the necessary conditions for people to obtain permanent IDs.

- **Support access to employment.**

The director for social services is keen to explore how to include social clauses in public procurement to encourage contractors – such as garbage collecting companies,

for instance – to add extra non-taxed benefits, such as meal vouchers to salary packages to make job offers more attractive and in line with the cost of living in the city.

- **Improve literacy levels.**

To improve literacy among young and adult Roma, a mobile 'library on wheels' will visit various neighbourhoods and lend books to stimulate reading.

- **Improve outreach social work.**

To better reach people in need where they live, the social services department will explore solutions to boost its outreach capacity, especially its social ambulance service. It will do so by recruiting volunteers including students in social work and those applying for a European Solidarity Corps project. Another possibility is to explore the 'Ghent model' of neighbourhood stewards, who are recruited to work directly with families in need with national and local budget funding.

- **Tackling domestic violence.**

Timisoara's social services department is also committed to addressing the violence prevalent among Roma and non-Roma families. Delegates from Gothenburg proposed applying to the calls under the EU Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme.

Timisoara's social services department has proven its commitment to improving the living conditions of Roma people and promoting their social inclusion in the city. To assess the progress made under a new improved action plan a follow-up study visit is foreseen in 2019.

Overall, the study visit to Timisoara has proven the added value of mutual learning between peer cities. It is a highly effective way to build local authorities' capacity to improve Roma inclusion policy and practice and to drive positive change in local communities. Three points of added value are remarkable. First, the study visit was an eye-opening experience that allowed the delegates from the **visiting cities to gain a sound understanding of the situation of Roma people in Romania**. By directly meeting and speaking to Roma families, they were able to gain deep insights into the challenges Roma people face in the community.

Moving forward, they are better informed; they can tailor policies and propose measures in their own cities to better integrate Roma coming from this part of Romania.

Secondly, the study visit reached its objective to provide the host city with **guidance on how to further improve its local action plan for Roma inclusion**. Based on the structured process involving presentations, on-site visits, interviews and discussions, the visiting city experts were able to formulate constructive feedback by identifying opportunities to build upon and suggestions for further improvement. Not only was the feedback welcomed by the host city, but clear commitments were also formulated on how to turn the suggestions for improvement into a longer term strategy.

Finally, the three day study visit nurtured a **deep mutual understanding and cultural exchange** between the participating cities that laid a **solid ground for future cooperation**. The process created a sense of community, which fostered open and honest dialogue based on trust. This method offers the promise of building lasting partnerships between cities and possible joint EUfunded projects. This collaboration can further strengthen social cohesion between EU cities in the east and west.

Both the host city and the critical friends from the visiting cities were very pleased with the outcomes of the study visit and the critical friend review. They will continue working together within the EUROCITIES working group on Roma inclusion.

Testimonials:

The head of the social services department, **Rodica Surducan**, was so thrilled with the constructive feedback received that she invited the visiting cities to come back for a follow-up visit in 2019 to see the improvements to come for themselves. She said: *“The professionalism, objectivity and correctness showed by the critical friends is the proof that European solidarity does exist: we are proud to be European and willing to reach the highest European standards in our policies”*.

Speaking on behalf of the visiting cities from EUROCITIES, **Maike Buyst**, chair of the Roma inclusion working group, stated how impressed she was by the hospitality and openness shown by the social services department and how much potential Timisoara has to take the existing efforts further for Roma inclusion in Romania. She said: *“I have been amazed by the openness and transparency of the Timisoara social services department, essential elements for a constructive dialogue and exchange of good practices. We are ready to apply the understanding gained here to the situation of Roma in Ghent”*.



Annex – results of the critical friend review

CRITICAL FRIEND REVIEW METHODOLOGY

During the EURO CITIES study visit in Timisoara on Roma inclusion, the critical friend review methodology was applied to analyse the host city’s policies and practices for Roma inclusion. The approach identifies strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to formulate suggestions and recommendations for short, medium and long term measures on the basis of what has already been done and what could be further improved.

SWOT ANALYSIS

As a crucial part of the critical friend review methodology, the SWOT analysis allows a precise identification of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. With respect to the local administration, the first two elements are considered as factors of internal origin, while the second ones are taken into account from an external perspective.

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Job fairs • Social ambulance • Parenting courses that enhance women empowerment • Action plan on Roma: the use of GIL and GLL structures, and collection of data based on Roma needs • Involvement of many NGOs and provision of funding to them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Top-down approach to target groups/NGOs: more participation is needed • Lack of affordable housing • Timing of training and vocational education courses for adults • Too few social workers present on the field in the Roma community • Too many actions in a short span of time
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong leadership and high dedication of social services • Political support of deputy mayor • Working with women towards gender equality and empowerment • Roma and NGOs committed and keen to get involved • Social commitment of many volunteers and NGOs • Know-how from URBACT III project • Job vacancies around Timisoara and low unemployment rate • Social survey in the city • Young Roma: opportunity for cultural change • Legal counselling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of political will at broader local level and national level • Short-term projects, dependence on EU funding • Lack of permanent ID documents due to lack of address and the property issue • Jobs for unskilled on minimum wage do not meet the high cost of living making them neither attractive nor stable • National elections: end of the mandate and political uncertainty

The second constituent part of the critical friend review is the plus/delta analysis, another tool to assess past, current and future performances: the ‘plus’ section represents what has brought value and should be continued, while the ‘delta’ section includes all those measures that could be changed or improved as well as new measures currently missing.

+ PLUS (positive, to be continued)	△ Delta (possible improvements)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Successful job fairs • Help Roma in obtaining IDs • Social ambulance • Focus on women empowerment • Focus on literacy and reading • Life cycle approach to help children and families • Craft workshops: building skills for life • Strong leadership of services driving the team and the cooperation with other departments: essence of political will at the local level • Continued enthusiasm and dedication of volunteers, NGOs and community members • Continued data collection, analysis and use to provide better services based on Roma people needs • Social inclusion is intended for all, not only for Roma community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasise ‘role models’ for Roma community • Employ additional staff to facilitate more regular outreach fieldwork in the Roma community • Raise awareness of the general public about issues such as poverty, Roma inclusion, discrimination, equality • Create a plan for transport: need for budget to be directed to before and after school buses • Add social clauses in public procurement to encourage contractors to offer decent pay • Focus on preventing early school leaving: enforce school attendance, reduce social benefits and closely cooperate with police and social workers • Address the land property problem in the Kuncz neighbourhood • Build capacity at institutional level • Enact a longer term action plan (minimum three years is necessary) with the commitment of other services and politicians for a more integrated approach • Develop the next action plan with the involvement of NGOs and the community around a comprehensive needs based assessment • Ensure broader political commitment from the mayor and city council • Create enhanced social cohesion by bridging the big gap between Roma and non-Roma communities in the city



Square de Meeûs 1
1000 Brussels
Belgium
Tel.: +32 2 552 08 88
info@eurocities.eu
www.eurocities.eu