



## Health impact assessment of Roma housing policies in Central and Eastern Europe: A comparative analysis

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### ABSTRACT

Marginalised Roma communities in European countries live in substandard housing conditions the improvement of which has been one of the major issues of the Decade of Roma Inclusion, the ongoing intergovernmental European Roma programme. The paper presents EU-funded health impact assessments of national Roma housing policies and programmes in 3 Central and Eastern European countries in light of the evaluation of a completed local project in a fourth CEE country so as to compare predicted effects to observed ones. Housing was predicted to have beneficial health effects by improving indoor and outdoor conditions, access to services, and socioeconomic conditions. Negative impacts were predicted only in terms of maintenance expenses and housing tenure. However, observed impacts of the completed local project did not fully support predictions especially in terms of social networks, satisfaction with housing and neighbourhood, and inhabitant safety. In order to improve the predictive value of HIA, more evidence should be produced by the careful evaluation of locally implemented housing projects. In addition, current evidence is in favour of planning Roma housing projects at the local rather than at the national level in alignment with the principle of subsidiarity.

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### 1. Introduction

The right to adequate housing is a universal right, recognised by international and European declarations, treaties and national

constitutions. The revised European Social Charter contains specific provisions on the right to housing (Council of Europe, 1996). Recommendations on the implementation of this right was recently issued by the Council of Europe specifying that an adequate dwelling must be structurally and legally secure, safe from a sanitary and health point of view and in possession of all basic amenities. Housing conditions should also comply with requirements on size, surroundings and the location of the dwelling in relation to work, school and social services (Council of Europe, 2009).

Considerable evidence supports the notion that adequate housing is related to health and that low quality of housing is associated with higher environmental risks and worse health status. Social status and low income in particular are strongly linked to substandard housing and increased exposure to environmental risks at home or at the residential location outdoors (Braubach and Fairburn, 2010; Evans and Kantrowitz, 2002; Rauh et al., 2008). This evidence has special importance for the European Roma community constituting the largest ethnic minority of the EU estimated at 10–12 million.

The majority of Roma people in Central and Eastern European countries have been experiencing great difficulties – among others – in terms of adequate housing due to the high costs of housing relative to

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their income and the low availability of social housing that results in considerably worse living conditions of Roma compared to the average for the country, and their segregation in separate neighbourhoods (European Roma Rights Centre, 2010). This situation jeopardises the health of Roma (Sepkowitz, 2006; Vozarova de Courten et al., 2003; Zeman et al., 2003), poses great challenges to their integration, and is destructive to the social cohesion and well-being of European societies.

Recognition of this problem led to a major European initiative with 12 participating countries titled “Decade of Roma Inclusion” for the period of 2005–2015 bringing together governments, inter-governmental and nongovernmental organisations as well as Romani civil society. The social inclusion of Roma was planned to be achieved through four priority areas, including housing besides education, employment, and health (Decade of Roma Inclusion, 2005). EU Member States of the Decade with sizeable Roma populations developed specific action plans with legislation and accompanying administrative acts but without the use of available decision aiding tools, such as health impact assessment (HIA), a powerful tool to express an explicit value judgement on health by supporting health oriented decision-making (Cashmore et al., 2010). The application of HIA in decision making has been lagging behind in new member states of the EU which led to the initiation of an EU-funded project titled “Health Impact Assessment in New Member States and Pre-Accession Countries” in which 7 countries joined to build HIA networks and to strengthen national capacities for carrying out HIAs in various fields. One such field was on policies regarding vulnerable populations of which the workgroup specified housing policies for Roma in four Central European countries (Bulgaria, Hungary, Lithuania and Slovakia). The comparative analysis of HIAs on housing policies aimed at Roma constitutes the topic of this paper.

## 2. Housing of marginalised Roma in the participating countries

The largest minority of Europe, the Roma have been multiply disadvantaged, such as in terms of housing in many European countries, among them the 4 states included in the analysis. The limited financial means of Roma usually preclude access to market-based housing, and considerable shortage of social housing in countries where their proportion is highest is an additional barrier to adequate living conditions. It follows that many of them are forced to use makeshift housing that is substandard or unacceptable, legally insecure, and, in many cases, segregated. Poverty and discrimination may be compounded by loss or lack of official personal identification documents that prevents access to other services as well (European Roma Rights Centre, 2010; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2009).

### 2.1. Bulgaria

370 thousand Roma live in the country according to census but estimates of minority advocacy groups put the numbers at 500–800,000 (Ringold et al., 2005; United Nations Development Programme, 2006). They are dispersed evenly throughout Bulgaria, more than half of them living in so-called mahalas or ghetto-like neighbourhoods of extremely substandard living conditions in urban centres. Most of the rest live in poor, isolated Roma villages scattered all over the country. Housing in segregated Roma neighbourhoods is one of the greatest social problems in Bulgaria. Illegal construction accounts for up to 80% of all construction in urban neighbourhoods and has been rising as a result of Roma migrating from rural areas to big cities. Illegal connection to electricity, water mains and sewage system has been widespread in these areas (Vassilev, 2004). Housing conditions in terms of hygiene and sanitation are poorest in the rural areas. According to the results of a national representative survey, 30% of rural households live in buildings that need urgent repair of the sewage system, roofs, electricity network, etc. In addition, one out of five households resides in a

dwelling unit that is in extremely poor condition, in danger of becoming uninhabitable unless repaired within the next 4 to 5 years (The World Bank and Vitosha Research, 2001).

### 2.2. Lithuania

2571 Roma lived in Lithuania in 2001 according to census data, representing 0.07% of the total population of Lithuania. However, estimates of the Minority Rights Group set the number of Roma living in Lithuania at 3000–4000 (Kuèinskaite, 2002). They live in many different parts of the country, but large communities can be found in Vilnius, Kaunas, Šiauliai and Panevėžys. According to the – so far unaccepted – draft of the National Programme on Roma Integration into Lithuanian Society 2010–2012, data on Roma housing quality in the country are not available. The Roma settlement in the Kirtimai area of the capital (Vilnius) is home to the largest Roma community with 511 inhabitants, 146 of them being children. They live in 99 illegally constructed buildings on municipality-owned land which do not meet basic construction standards. Dwellings are poor and overcrowded, there are no paved roads, and due to the absence of sewage system in this area, water in the public pumps often becomes non-potable after heavy rains (Kuèinskaite, 2002). A shortage of social housing prevented the municipality from solving the housing problem of the community, in spite of recommendations of the ECRI (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, ECRI, 2006).

### 2.3. Slovakia

The last census recorded a little less than 90 thousand Roma in the country, whereas minority organisations estimate the country's Roma population at 400,000–600,000 Roma, accounting for 8 to 10% of the population (The World Bank Foundation et al., 2002; Council of Europe, 2010). A socio-graphic mapping of Romany communities in Slovakia was commissioned by the government in 2003 to gain reliable data on the Roma communities, and identify and assess their needs. The mapping revealed that whilst Roma were integrated in approximately 50% of all 1575 identified Roma settlement units, the remaining 787 settlements were considered non-integrated communities. Of these, a further 149 settlements were classified as segregated, that is, located at the edge or outside of villages and towns with no access to running water and with the percentage of illegal dwellings in excess of 20% (Socio-Graphic Surveying of Roma Communities in Slovakia, 2003).

### 2.4. Hungary

As opposed to the 190 thousand Roma who identified themselves in the last census, estimates put their numbers at 520–650 thousand (Kemény et al., 2004). Many Roma live in segregated conditions (‘colonies’). A survey carried out by the National Public Health Service in 2003–2004 identified 767 Gipsy colonies on 530 settlements with 138,000 inhabitants in Hungary. The hygienic situation was deemed to be unacceptable at most of them due to hygienically neglected dwellings, the occurrence of rodents and unvaccinated stray dogs, lack of piped water in 26% of colonies, and illegal waste deposits and animal carcass deposits at more than 10% of the colonies (Ungváry et al., 2005). Another environmental survey of segregated habitats commissioned by the Ministry of Environmental Health and carried out by an academic institution with a network of Roma field workers between 2000 and 2005 revealed that approximately 134,000 Hungarians lived in 758 substandard, segregated habitats (colonies) mostly in the north-eastern part of the country, and 94% of all colonies were populated dominantly by Roma. The most frequent environmental problems in these colonies were found to be lack of sewage and gas mains, garbage deposits, waterlogged soil, and lack of water mains (Kósa et al., 2011).

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