Journal of Research and Innovation for Sustainable Society (JRISS)
Volume 7, Issue 2, 2025
ISSN: 2668-0416
Thoth Publishing House

DOI: 10.33727/JRISS.2025.2.17:196-201

A quarter of a decade later. Public policies for Roma inclusion in the European Union (2000–2025): Evolution, governance, and impact.

Andrei Ghimisi[1]

Romanian Academy, Research Institute for Quality of Life

E-mail: ghimisi4567@gmail.com

Abstract. Over the last twenty-five years, the European Union (EU) has gradually transformed its approach to Roma inclusion, evolving from fragmented anti-discrimination instruments into a comprehensive, multi-level governance system. This article examines the development of public policies directed at Roma communities across the EU between 2000 and 2025, analyzing how EU institutions—and particularly the European Commission—have shaped national strategies through legislation, funding, monitoring, and soft governance.
Keywords: *roma, public policies, European Union*

1. Introduction

The beginning of the twenty-first century marked a decisive change in the European Union's engagement with Roma inclusion. Prior to 2000, EU action was largely limited to anti-discrimination norms and soft political commitments, lacking a coordinated strategic framework. The adoption of the Race Equality Directive (2000/43/EC) represented the first major legal step toward protecting Roma rights. The Directive prohibited discrimination on grounds of race or ethnic origin in employment, education, housing, and access to public services, and it served as a cornerstone for future legal and policy developments[1]. It also established a mandatory institutional infrastructure in the form of equality bodies, which became essential actors in monitoring discrimination against Roma communities.

Simultaneously, the EU enlargement process exerted strong pressure on Central and Eastern European states—Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, and Hungary in particular—to adopt minority rights protections as part of the Copenhagen criteria. The European Commission evaluated Roma inclusion in each country's annual progress reports, noting deficiencies in areas such as schooling, employment, and housing.[2] While pre-accession monitoring spurred the creation of early Roma strategies, many scholars argue that these reforms were shallow and driven by EU conditionality rather than domestic political will[3].

By the mid-2000s, reports from NGOs, the Council of Europe, and the European Parliament revealed that anti-discrimination law alone was insufficient to address deep structural issues such as segregation, poverty, and antigypsyism[4]. In response, the EU gradually shifted toward a more proactive and coordinated approach.

[1] Directive 2000/43/EC (Race Equality Directive).
[2] European Commission, Regular Reports on Candidate Countries (1998–2004).
[3] Peter Vermeersch, *The Romani Movement* (London/New York: Berghahn Books, 2006).
[4] Council of Europe, *Roma and Travellers Division Reports* (2004–2010).

This shift culminated in the adoption of the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS) 2011–2020, the first comprehensive Roma-specific EU policy architecture. It required every Member State to adopt a national Roma strategy covering education, employment, healthcare, and housing[5]. The Framework institutionalized Roma inclusion as a European public policy field, introducing monitoring, reporting, and coordination across governments.

Yet, by 2020, evidence from the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) revealed limited improvements: Roma remained one of the most excluded minority groups in Europe, with widespread poverty, discrimination, and segregation persisting[6]. These findings pushed the EU toward a more ambitious strategy in the next decade.

2. European Commission Strategies and Soft Governance Mechanisms

Although the EU lacks direct legislative competence in minority protection, the European Commission has shaped Roma inclusion through soft governance, funding, and monitoring. Scholars describe this as "Europeanization through persuasion," a form of policy diffusion based on norms and coordination rather than binding law[7].

Agenda-setting was one of the Commission's most powerful tools. In 2010, it issued a communication concluding that Member States had failed to reduce Roma exclusion and calling for coordinated EU action. This directly triggered the 2011 EU Roma Framework[8]. The Commission then institutionalized monitoring: Member States were required to submit annual or biennial reports, which the Commission assessed using evidence from FRA surveys documenting persistent discrimination and socio-economic disparities[9].

In certain cases, the Commission also used legal enforcement. It launched infringement procedures related to segregated schooling in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, arguing that such practices violated the Race Equality Directive[10].Although such actions were rare, they demonstrated that EU anti-discrimination law could be mobilized to protect Roma rights.

A major turning point arrived in 2020 with the EU Roma Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion and Participation 2020–2030. The new framework expanded the focus from socio-economic inclusion to anti-racism, explicitly naming antigypsyism as a structural cause of exclusion[11]. It strengthened indicators, required Member States to address discrimination more directly, and aligned Roma policy with the EU Anti-Racism Action Plan.

In recent years, the European Commission has intensified its use of soft-governance instruments—such as guidance, peer-review mechanisms, funding conditionality, and strategic communications—to advance Roma inclusion and broader equality goals. A key development was the Commission's 2022 Assessment of National Roma Strategic Frameworks, which evaluated Member State implementation and identified persistent gaps in areas such as monitoring, data collection, and anti-discrimination enforcement[12]This assessment reflects a growing reliance on monitoring and reporting cycles as central tools of EU influence.

Another important trend concerns the increased use of funding-embedded conditionality. Following the introduction of the Recovery and Resilience Facility, scholars have noted that access to EU financial resources is increasingly linked to commitments on social inclusion, rule of law, and fundamental rights. While still considered "soft law," this form of conditionality gives the Commission indirect leverage over domestic reforms related to equality and inclusion.

---

[5] European Commission, EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies, 2011.

[6] FRA, Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey – Roma (2018).

[7] Joanna Kostka, "Implementation of Roma Inclusion Policies: Why Defining the Problem Matters," *Social Inclusion* 3, no. 5 (2015).

[8] European Commission, Roma Inclusion Report (2010).

[9] FRA, Roma Survey Data (2016; 2021).

[10] ERRC, Legal Briefings on School Segregation (2014–2020).

[11] European Commission, EU Roma Strategic Framework 2020–2030 (2020).

[12] European Commission, Assessment Report on National Roma Strategic Frameworks, 2022.

In the education and inclusion domains relevant to Roma communities, the EC has continued to expand project-based governance initiatives. The INSCHOOL 3 – Inclusive Schools programme—implemented jointly by the Commission and the Council of Europe—held its final conference in 2024, highlighting the use of peer learning, pedagogical toolkits, and local-level capacity-building to promote inclusive education practices. Such initiatives demonstrate how Europeanization can occur through knowledge transfer rather than formal regulation.

Finally, the Commission's broader strategic planning reflects this soft-governance shift. The 2024 strategic communication Europe's Choice emphasizes outcome-oriented objectives, shared indicators, and voluntary commitments across Member States, signaling the consolidation of benchmarking, peer review, and coordinated target-setting within EU governance. These mechanisms—non-binding yet increasingly influential—play a growing role in shaping national Roma policies, especially where political will or administrative capacity is weak.

Overall, developments in the last years illustrate how the Commission has strengthened its soft-governance toolkit through enhanced monitoring, financial incentives, project-based cooperation, and strategic communication. These mechanisms now form a central part of EU efforts to promote Roma inclusion, complementing legal instruments while addressing areas where formal enforcement remains limited.

3. National Roma Strategies: Successes and Failures

Across Europe, national Roma strategies evolved unevenly between 2011 and 2025. On the positive side, every Member State now has a national Roma contact point and a formal strategy—an institutional milestone made possible only through EU coordination. Some countries, notably Spain, Portugal, Finland, and Ireland, achieved tangible progress through participatory approaches, well-funded programs, and stable political support. Spain's educational mediation programs and Portugal's anti-segregation measures are often cited as best practices[13].

Yet the broader picture across Europe remains challenging. FRA data shows that Roma continue to face high unemployment, limited healthcare access, and widespread poverty[14]. School segregation persists in Central and Eastern Europe, where local authorities often resist desegregation[15]. Housing segregation is equally pervasive, as Roma frequently live in isolated or substandard areas, and forced evictions remain an unresolved issue[16].

A central barrier is **antigypsyism**, which undermines implementation at every level of governance. As Iulius Rostas, Serigo Carrera and Lina Vosyliūtė argue, unless structural racism is addressed, Roma inclusion strategies cannot succeed[17]. In many countries, strategies exist primarily on paper, with gaps in funding, coordination, and political will.

In examining these dynamics, it becomes clear that the overall effectiveness of national Roma strategies depends on more than legal frameworks or policy documents; it hinges on the interaction between political will, administrative capacity, and societal attitudes. In many cases, national governments publicly endorse Roma inclusion while simultaneously tolerating local practices that perpetuate segregation or discrimination. This tension reflects the reality that Roma policies often become sites of political negotiation, where mayors and local councils prioritize electoral considerations over compliance with national or EU directives. As a result, reforms in education, housing, or employment frequently stall at the point of implementation, producing a cycle in which institutions acknowledge systemic exclusion but fail to intervene decisively.

[13] OECD, Social Inclusion Country Notes (2015–2020).

[14] FRA, Second EU-MIDIS – Roma (2018).

[15] FRA, Segregation of Roma Children in Education (2017).

[16] Remus Crețan, Ryan Powell, and Sam Hind, "Everyday Roma Stigmatization: Racialized Urban Encounters, Collective Histories and Fragmented Habitus," *Social & Cultural Geography* (2022): 1–22.

[17] Sergio Carrera, Iulius Rostas, and Lina Vosyliūtė, Combating Institutional Anti-Gypsyism: Responses and Promising Practices in the EU and Selected Member States (CEPS, 2017).

Ultimately, the mixed record of national Roma strategies between 2011 and 2025 reveals both the possibilities and constraints of EU-driven policy coordination. While the EU successfully created a shared policy framework that compelled Member States to articulate priorities and report on progress, the transformative impact of these strategies has been limited by structural racism, unstable political environments, and insufficient institutional capacity. These challenges suggest that future progress will depend not only on refining policy instruments but also on addressing the deeper structural forces that shape how Roma communities are perceived and treated within European societies. Without a commitment to confronting these underlying dynamics, national strategies risk remaining formal obligations rather than tools of genuine social transformation.

In the period after 2021, national Roma strategies increasingly faced the challenge of translating ambitious EU-level expectations into concrete, measurable actions at the local level. While every Member State formally updated its strategy in line with the 2020–2030 EU Roma Strategic Framework, the degree of implementation varied significantly. In several Central and Eastern European countries, evaluations from civil society and independent monitoring bodies revealed that policy documents often lacked operational budgets, clear timelines, or mechanisms for inter-ministerial cooperation.

Recent monitoring also indicates that discrimination and antigypsyism remain significantly under-addressed in many national strategies. Although the post-2020 frameworks emphasize combating structural racism, only a subset of Member States introduced concrete measures such as anti-bias training for civil servants, desegregation targets, or systems to track discriminatory local practices. In most countries, anti-racism components are still framed as awareness-raising rather than institutional reform. This gap suggests that while the new EU framework has shifted the discourse toward rights and equality, national strategies have been slower to internalize this shift in practice.

In sum, the evolution of national Roma strategies since 2020 demonstrates both progress and recurring limitations. While formal structures, participation mechanisms, and EU alignment have improved, the deeper issues of political resistance, insufficient administrative capacity, and systemic antigypsyism continue to impede transformative change. The effectiveness of these strategies thus depends not only on compliance with EU frameworks but also on reshaping the institutional and societal conditions that determine how Roma inclusion is prioritized—or sidelined—within national policymaking.

4. The Shift Toward Rights, Equality, and Anti-Racism (2020–2025)

After 2020, Roma inclusion was reframed within a broader European anti-racism agenda. The EU Anti-Racism Action Plan (2020) acknowledged that structural discrimination affects multiple minority groups and called for stronger enforcement of anti-discrimination law[18]. This reorientation influenced the Roma Framework 2020–2030, which emphasized equality, participation, and the fight against antigypsyism.

A key policy development was the EU's explicit recognition, in the Council Conclusions of 2019, that antigypsyism is the root cause of Roma exclusion[19]. This created a foundation for integrating anti-racist principles into national Roma strategies.

At the societal level, new forms of Roma activism gained momentum. Digital and youth-led mobilization has grown significantly since 2020. Anna Daróczi documents how Roma youth increasingly use online platforms to challenge discrimination and create transnational advocacy networks[20]. Roma feminist organizations have also become more visible, advocating for intersectional approaches that address both racism and gender inequality.[21]

[18] European Commission, EU Anti-Racism Action Plan 2020–2025.

[19] Council of the EU, Conclusions on Combating Antigypsyism (2019).

[20] Anna Daróczi, Lisa Smith, and Sarah Cemlyn, "Romani young people's activism and transformative change," in Romani Communities and Transformative Change: A New Social Europe, ed. Andrew Ryder et al. (Bristol: Policy Press, 2021)

[21] Gheorghe, Carmen. "The Distance Between Us: Feminist and Queer Roma Repositioning Strategies." In *QUEER*, coordinated by V. Iancu and O. Anemtoaicei. Hecate Publishing, 2020

Civil society has played a decisive role in Roma rights advocacy since 2000. The European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) has been central in litigating cases before national courts and the European Court of Human Rights, challenging segregation, police abuse, and discriminatory housing practices. These legal victories pressured governments to adopt reforms, even when implementation lagged.

Philanthropic organizations have complemented this legal activism. The Open Society Foundations (OSF) has funded Roma NGOs, education programs, community initiatives, and litigation efforts for decades. Its 2023 €100 million Roma Foundation Initiative represents one of the largest investments in Roma civil society in Europe[22]

A major innovation in participation was the Roma Civil Monitor, an EU-funded project that enabled Roma-led monitoring of national strategies. This initiative enhanced accountability, offering a counterbalance to government self-reporting and strengthening the evidence base used in Commission assessments.

Civil society developments in 2024–2025 also shaped the EU anti-racism environment. Roma-led organizations increasingly coordinated transnational advocacy efforts, especially around digital rights, police violence, and discriminatory algorithms used in welfare and child-protection systems. These areas gained significant traction in EU-level debates, as artificial intelligence regulation and fundamental rights impact assessments became central policy topics. Roma groups played a notable role in framing these discussions through a racial justice lens, arguing that new technologies risk reproducing long-standing patterns of institutional discrimination.

Overall, while civil society cannot compensate for weak political will, it remains one of the most effective forces shaping Roma inclusion policies across Europe.

5. Conclusions

Between 2000 and 2025, the European Union gradually transformed Roma inclusion from a marginal social concern into a structured field of European governance. What began with anti-discrimination legislation in the early 2000s evolved into a multi-level policy architecture involving EU institutions, national governments, regional authorities, and Roma civil society. The development of the Race Equality Directive, the establishment of the NRIS framework, and the adoption of the 2020–2030 EU Roma Strategic Framework collectively demonstrate that the EU has become a central actor in shaping Roma inclusion policies, even in areas where its formal competences are limited.

Yet despite this institutional progress, the lived reality of many Roma across Europe has changed far more slowly. Persistently high rates of poverty, school segregation, inadequate housing, and discrimination underscore the limits of policy frameworks that lack robust enforcement mechanisms. The gap between EU-level ambition and national-level implementation reveals a structural tension: while the EU can set standards, collect data, and guide funding, it is national and local authorities that ultimately determine whether Roma policies translate into real-world improvements. Where political will exists, progress has been demonstrable; where it is absent, strategies stagnate.

The central finding emerging from two decades of research and policy evaluation is that antigypsyism—not merely socio-economic disadvantage is the key impediment to lasting change. Structural racism shapes political decisions, local administrative practices, and public attitudes, often neutralizing the impact of otherwise well-designed strategies. The EU's more recent recognition of antigypsyism as a systemic issue marks an important conceptual shift, but its implications for enforcement and accountability remain to be fully realized.

Looking ahead, Roma inclusion policies must therefore transcend narrow social-assistance models and embrace a broader rights-based and anti-racist framework. This requires strengthening mechanisms for monitoring and compliance, expanding Roma participation at every stage of policy-making, and linking EU funding more directly to measurable equality outcomes.

[22] Open Society Foundations, Roma Foundation Initiative Announcement (2023).

6. Bibliography

[1] Carrera, Sergio, Iulius Rostas, and Lina Vosyliūtė. *Combating Institutional Anti-Gypsyism*. Brussels: CEPS, 2017.
[2] Council of the European Union. *Conclusions on Combating Antigypsyism and Promoting Roma Equality*. Brussels, 2019.
[3] Council Directive 2000/43/EC (Race Equality Directive).
[4] Creţan, Remus, Ryan Powell, and Sam Hind. "Everyday Roma Stigmatization." *Social & Cultural Geography* (2022): 1–22.
[5] Daróczi, Anna, Lisa Smith, and Sarah Cemlyn. "Romani Young People's Activism and Transformative Change." In *Romani Communities and Transformative Change*, edited by Andrew Ryder et al., 117–135. Bristol: Policy Press, 2021.
[6] European Commission. *EU Anti-Racism Action Plan 2020–2025*. Brussels, 2020.
[7] European Commission. *EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies*. Brussels, 2011.
[8] European Commission. *EU Roma Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion and Participation 2020–2030*. Brussels, 2020.
[9] European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC). *Strategic Litigation Reports*. Various years.
[10] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). *Second EU-MIDIS — Roma*. Vienna, 2018.
[11] FRA. *Segregation of Roma Children in Education*. Vienna, 2017.
[12] Gheorghe, Carmen. "The Distance Between Us: Feminist and Queer Roma Repositioning Strategies." In *QUEER*, coordinated by V. Iancu and O. Anemtoaicei. Hecate Publishing, 2020.
[13] Ghimisi, Andrei. "Minority groups in Romania during the communist regime." *Journal of Research & Innovation for Sustainable Society (JRISS)* 2 (2020).
[14] Ghimisi, Andrei. "The assimilation of the Roma people during the communist regime." *Journal of Research & Innovation for Sustainable Society (JRISS)* 6.1 (2024).
[15] Ghimisi, Andrei. "Roma people and their road to cultural identity." *Journal of Research & Innovation for Sustainable Society (JRISS)* 5.1 (2023).
[16] Ghimișı, Andrei Stefan. "The Beginning of the Europeanisation Process for the Roma People and Their European Identity." *Sfera Politicii* (2022): 15.
[17] Ghimisi, Andrei. "The new European Union Strategic Framework for Roma Integration 2020-2030: Insights and recommendations for the national strategic frameworks." *Journal of Research and Innovation for Sustainable Society* 3.1 (2021): 64-68.
[18] Kostka, Joanna. "Implementation of Roma Inclusion Policies: Why Defining the Problem Matters." *Social Inclusion* 3, no. 5 (2015): 78–89.
[19] OECD. *Social Inclusion Country Notes*. Paris, 2015–2020.
[20] Open Society Foundations. *Roma Foundation Initiative Announcement*. New York, 2023.
[21] Peter Vermeersch, *The Romani Movement* (London/New York: Berghahn Books, 2006).