



# Civil society monitoring report on implementation of the national Roma integration strategies in Belgium

Focusing on structural and horizontal  
preconditions  
for successful implementation of the strategy

**Prepared by:**  
*Roma and Travellers Mediation Center*  
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**Civil society monitoring report  
on implementation of the  
national Roma integration strategy  
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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CeRAIC	Regional Integration Centre of La Louvière
CIRE	Coordination and Initiatives for Refugees and Foreigners
CMGVR	Roma and Travellers Mediation Centre
COCOM	Joint Community Commission (Flemish-French speaking in Brussels)
CPAS	Public Centre for Social Action
CSA	High Audio-visual Council
CIRE	Coordination and Initiatives for Refugees and Foreigners
ECSR	European Committee of Social Rights
ERIO	European Roma Information Office
FOYER	Regional Integration Centre
LDH	Human Rights League
Minderhendenforum	Forum of Minorities
MRAX	Movement Against Racism, Antisemitism and Xenophobia
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NRCP	National Roma Contact Point
NRP	Nation Roma Platform
SPP/POD	Federal Public Service for Social Integration (NRCP)
UNIA	Equal Opportunity Body
VGC	Flemish Community Commission



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Governance and overall policy framework

In Belgium, there is currently no person of Roma or Traveller belonging directly involved in national and regional politics outside of informal consultations. It makes it very difficult for community representatives to make their voices heard. To this day, the political implication of Roma and Travellers representatives is limited to non-binding consultation processes that are occasionally organised in the elaboration of policies, measures and recommendations targeting their communities.

The mainstreaming of Roma inclusion is organised at the national, regional and local level, by public authorities, integration institutions and civil society organisations. There are several civil society organisations and public institutions working on Roma inclusion, though at varying degrees of intensity and at different levels (federal, regional, local). They range from broader institutions focusing on issues of integration and equal opportunity for minorities to field organisations working specifically with both the Roma and Travellers communities, and to Roma/Travellers self-organisations. These different stakeholders formulate recommendations to decision-makers and participate to the evaluation of the strategy for Roma and Travellers' inclusion. However, these recommendations are not automatically nor effectively integrated into policy decisions. Community representatives, civil society organisations and local services are still not sufficiently consulted in the development of policies concerning Travellers and Roma.

At the federal level, the State Secretary for Social Integration is in charge of mainstreaming Roma inclusion measures and of checking upon law implementation amongst public social assistance centres at the local level. In the three Belgian Regions (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels), there are action plans (directly or indirectly) targeting Roma inclusion by promoting, amongst other things, the employment of Roma mediators, participation to a civic integration program (with citizenship and language classes), and coordination between local authorities/services and the civil society.

Grassroots organisations and the civil society play a crucial role in mainstreaming Roma inclusion amongst local authorities and services. They raise awareness and provide action tools to local stakeholders through conferences and trainings, as well as through supervision meetings focused on Roma inclusion practices and on the organisation of Travellers' temporary stay. Roma people are involved at the local level as mediators. They support the communication with Roma and their inclusion into the wider society. However, except for one municipality (Amay), no Traveller works as mediator.

It should be noted that Roma are no longer represented at the national level because the National Roma Council is no longer effective. However, the National Travellers Committee, a self-organised NGO, is regularly consulted by the public authorities. At the local level, there are several self-organised Roma and Traveller associations. Civil society organisations, such as the CMGVR, support their presence at discussion tables at the national, regional and local levels and transmit their claims to the political spheres.

Finally, discrimination against Roma is not tackled in a structural manner: so far, political commitment for Roma inclusion is still mostly determined by personal convictions and willingness to act.

### Anti-discrimination

The Racial Equality Directive implementation is not sufficient to insure an equal access to housing, employment and education for Roma. According to some of the main actors interviewed, this Directive has little effectiveness in preventing discrimination. Access to justice procedures for victims is difficult, in particular because it is up to the victim to prove the discrimination. According to several stakeholders we interviewed, the Belgian

Equal Opportunity Body (UNIA) mostly follows up on complaints that are linked to widespread discrimination, but hardly engages in legal proceedings for a private individual complaint. This service receives very few complaints of alleged discrimination experienced by Roma or Travellers. This phenomenon of underreporting amongst Roma and Travellers is often explained by a certain mistrust towards public institutions. Moreover, discriminatory behaviours often occur at the local level, which makes it difficult to lodge a complaint without fearing for retaliation.

Discrimination is also visible through segregation phenomenon in education and housing. However, Roma and Traveller children face different issues. The educational segregation of Roma children is highly linked to economic deprivation and to linguistic barriers. Some programs attempt to tackle these issues by offering school support, by working on the communication between parents and schools, and by combatting early dropouts. For Travellers' children, schooling is impaired by the fact that the school system is not adapted to a mobile lifestyle, as well as by the lack of available sites for Travellers. Despite some positive measures, forced evictions of Travellers and Roma are still a reality: the public sites available for travellers are highly insufficient and the number of Roma families living in squats is increasing.

The right to freedom of movement is not entirely effective for Roma and Travellers families. One reason for that is that the right to freedom of movement requires sufficient financial resources in order to avoid becoming an "unreasonable burden for the State". For many Roma families living in deep poverty, it is difficult to meet this first condition of financial self-sustainability. When they apply for a social assistance, the Foreigners Office is likely to withdraw their residence permit. For what concerns Travellers, the right to freedom of movement is impacted by the lack of available sites and by the fact that many local authorities do not want caravans on their territory.

### Addressing antigypsyism

Antigypsyism is a new term, and it is so far mainly used at the European level. As a result, at the national level, there are no funds allocated, nor structures established by the government to address antigypsyism as a specific form of racism. Awareness-raising amongst public services and local authorities is thus mostly up to grassroots organisations. For instance, the CMGVR, the Foyer and the CIRE regularly organise conferences and trainings for public authorities, but also for public services such as health care professionals, social workers, police, schools and public administration.

Stigmatization is still present in the media: when Roma are in the news, it is mostly about problems and nuisances (begging, homelessness, delinquency, school drop-outs). The current situation of Roma and Travellers in Belgium reflects that stigmatization in the media directly participates to discrimination in society.

The internet is also a space where constant streams of hate against Roma and Travellers occur. On a daily basis, hateful/racist comments are diffused, based on incorrect information, stereotypes and rumours. Social networks and newspapers web pages are hardly ever subjected to moderation. However, it must be said that the systematic reporting of hateful/racist comments has shown effective.

## INTRODUCTION

*"A number of studies carried out in Belgium and by experts in the field confirm the European Commission's assessment of the socio-economic circumstances of the Roma in Belgium, many of whom live in poverty and suffer from social exclusion. Access to basic services such as education, decent housing, healthcare and the labour market is hampered by a number of different obstacles". (Belgian Strategy for Roma Inclusion, 2012, p. 10)*

The Belgian Strategy for Roma inclusion distinguishes between the Roma and Travellers communities: "A distinction is made between Travellers (Manouches, Romani and Sinti) and more recent arrivals, who are mainly sedentary (Eastern European) Roma". It should be noted that there are no specific numbers on these groups because collection of ethnic data is illegal and forbidden by law.

According to the Belgian strategy, there is an estimated number of about 10,000 Travellers living in Belgium. They are mostly of Belgian nationality and are characterized by their mobile lifestyle. For what concerns Roma, it is estimated in the Strategy that around 30,000 of them live in Belgium. The majority have kept their nationality from Eastern and Central European countries. The strategy identifies different waves of immigration: "The first Eastern European Roma came to Belgium after World War Two (among others, Yugoslavian Roma looking for work) but the third major influx of immigrants was triggered by the fall of the Iron Curtain". (2012, p.8)

In Belgium, the 2012 national strategy for Roma inclusion stemmed from the reflection of a working group created in 2010 and the focus on migrations from Central Europe. This group was mandated by the State Secretary for Social Integration. The Belgian strategy advocates for a comprehensive approach including 2020 objectives: participation, access to education, employment, healthcare, housing, migrations monitoring, social integration, political coordination, anti-discrimination and data collection. For the Belgian strategy, social work with Roma is still an *"imperfect and approximate collaboration"*, because it still typically takes place in spaces characterised by linguistic barriers and mutual misrepresentations. In this regard, the strategy pushes for the use of intercultural mediation, which is presented as an efficient tool for Roma and Travellers' socio-economic inclusion. The document recommends resorting on intercultural mediators and street stewards to stimulate a better connection between services, as well as a better cohabitation in city neighbourhoods. To this end, the strategy presents training, information and sensitisation of social workers as primordial steps for the improvement of social assistance.

The present document examines the implementation of the national strategy for Roma inclusion in three key fields: governance, the fight against discrimination and the fight against antigypsyism. The subjects of housing, health, employment and education will be addressed in the second round of policy monitoring.

The methodology used for this report inscribes a qualitative approach, combined an analysis of existing documentation (studies, reports, laws, court cases, websites of services and institutions concerned) with data collection amongst the main stakeholders involved in Roma and Travellers' inclusion processes (grassroots organisations, community representatives, mediators, integration and equal opportunity institutions, public authorities and social services). Based on the priority issues of this first monitoring report, it was established a questionnaire, as well as a list of key contacts, institutions and authorities to whom the questions should be sent (at the national, regional and local levels). The questions were open-ended and our interlocutors were free to respond by mail, phone, or in a face-to-face interview. It was also organised a round-table discussion with representatives of the Roma and Traveller communities in order to discuss the specific topics of this monitoring report. Finally, it was proceeded to data analysis and to the writing of the report.

In the frame of the production of the present monitoring report, the authors have contacted the following institutions, services and people to request their contributions on the questionnaire:

- Public bodies: The Federal Public Service for Social Integration (National Roma contact point), UNIA (Equal Opportunity Body), The Minderheden Forum (Forum of Minorities), The VZW Integratie-Inburgering;
- Civil society organisations: the CIRE (Coordination and Initiatives for Refugees and Foreigners), The Roma and Travellers service of the *Foyer, Ligue des Droits de l'Homme* (LDH – Human Rights League), Cell against Social Exclusion of the Prevention Service of Molenbeek, *Bruxelles Laïque*, MRAX (Movement Against Racism, Antisemitism and Xenophobia), CMGVR (*Centre de Médiation des Gens du Voyage et des Roms en Wallonie* – Mediation Centre for Roma and Travellers in Wallonia), Regional Centres for Integration, about ten representatives of the Roma and Travellers communities (mediators, spokesperson, activists), field workers In-Gent organisation.

## GOVERNANCE AND OVERALL POLICY FRAMEWORK

### Representing the interests of Roma in the parliament

In Belgium, there is currently no person of Roma or Traveller descent directly involved in the national and regional politics outside of informal consultation. Those political parties that push for the values of social inclusion and multiculturalism, uphold rather general agendas and broad measures, avoiding focusing on specific communities. On the other end of the spectrum, there is luckily no political party in the Parliament with a pronounced antigypsyist agenda. The CIRE confirms that Roma-related matters do not unleash frequent media storms or overt antigypsyist speeches in the political sphere. Pro or anti-Roma positions thus seem attached to individual politicians more than to political parties.

On this subject, some field workers and grassroots organisations deplore that in this moment, there is no real political impulse to tackle discrimination against Roma in a structural manner: so far, political commitment against injustice and discrimination is still mostly determined by personal convictions and willingness to act. Such lack of a clear stance directly impacts the way in which issues faced by Roma and Travellers are dealt with in other spheres, notably in local policies and social work.

It should be noted that there are no specific numbers on Roma votes, notably because of the impossibility and illegality of collecting ethnic data.

### Mainstreaming Roma inclusion across ministries and other national level public authorities

According to the national strategy, the political coordination of various measures at stake – and thus their mainstreaming across ministries and other national and regional level public authorities – is to be insured by different workgroups and discussion platforms at the regional level, and by the intergovernmental workgroup “*Roms en provenance des PECO*” (Roma coming from Central and Eastern Europe) at the federal level. At first, this workgroup gathered representatives of the Belgian Regions, of the linguistic Communities, of the Federal authorities, as well as spokesperson for Roma/Travellers organisations and associations defending foreigners’ rights.

Since 2016, Roma have access to the “integration path” set up for foreigners and people of foreign origin in Wallonia. This support is intended to help them learn French language, to have a basic knowledge of society, to increase their opportunities of participating in society, to find employment, and to support their children’s schooling. For each person, an interview is conducted to make a social assessment (a review of achievements, competences, diplomas and possible equivalences), to provide relevant information on the rights and duties of each person residing in Belgium and to provide help with the administrative procedures that can be engaged. These activities (assessment and training) are free. To benefit from this assistance, a contract is signed with the beneficiary for a maximum of 18 months.<sup>1</sup> Roma do benefit from this assistance, but there is no number assessing to what extent.

Since 2012, the Flemish Department of Interior has its own action plan: the *Vlaamse Actieplan MOE (Roma)-Migranten*. Officially, it targets all immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe, but according to most stakeholders it is tailor-made for Roma migrants. Flanders thus have a specific integration program for Roma, which promotes Roma socio-professional insertion (notably through the hiring of Roma “neighbourhood stewards” and mediators).

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<sup>1</sup> Circulaire du 11 mai 2017, titre III: parcours d’intégration.  
<http://actionsociale.wallonie.be/integration/parcours-integration-primo-arrivants>.

At the time when the Belgian strategy was presented to the European Commission, the National Roma Contact Point was created. Its role is to ensure the follow-up and the annual evaluation of the implementation of the national strategy for Roma inclusion, the formulation of recommendations on adjustments of the strategy, as well as the connexion between the strategy and the European framework. In 2015, its functioning and composition were evaluated and it led to the transformation of the Contact Point into an administrative workgroup led by representatives of federal and regional authorities: the Federal Public Service for Social Integration (SPP/POD), the *Vlaamse overheid* (department of Equal Opportunities, social and civic integration), the Wallonia Public Service, the Brussels-Capital Community Commission, the Government of the German community of Belgium, and the Flemish Community Commission (VGC). The National Roma Contact Point functions under the auspices of the Federal Public Service for Social Integration. It must be noted that there are no longer any Roma or Travellers, nor civil society representatives represented amongst the permanent members of the National Roma Contact Point.

The National Roma Contact Point is at the source of the creation of the National Roma Platform (NRP), which was launched in 2016. The official objective of the NRP is to initiate a participative dialogue between all stakeholders: local authorities, experts and academics, members of the civil society, representatives of public social assistance centre, Roma/Travellers organisations and mediators, and administrative personnel. The aim of the NRP is to formulate recommendations to decision-makers, and to participate in the evaluation of the national strategy. During the first year of the Platform (2016-2017), four dialogue meetings were held, each with a specific focus on themes considered as the pillars of Roma's socio-economic integration: education, employment, health and housing. For each one of these fields, an emphasis was placed on anti-discrimination, a theme that is meant to be the common thread all along the consultation process. The first year of the platform was concluded by an Open Doors Day, where all political and civil society stakeholders interested in the issue could participate and get informed.

All through 2016, following the thematic meetings, the National Roma Platform has issued recommendations to the competent authorities and decision-makers on each of the four topic themes (education, employment health and housing).<sup>2</sup> Concerning the broader issues targeted by this part of the monitoring (governance, anti-discrimination and antigypsyism), the National Roma Platform has recommended focusing on the fight against discrimination and stigmatisation, and on the promotion of a participative approach to inclusion practices. Since no modification have been brought to the 2012 strategy for Roma inclusion, it is unclear whether these recommendations have had real political repercussions.

According to the CIRE, the strength of thematic meetings organised by the NRP is that they constituted an attempt to bring together many of the stakeholders concerned by the discussed themes. However, several grassroots organisations and civil society representatives we interviewed shared their disappointment with the lack of depth in the reflexion, due to the short duration of the thematic meetings (half a day) and to the simultaneous focus on both Roma and Travellers. Since these target groups are distinct and experience very different realities, the recommendations that came out of the meetings are quite general and it is unclear to what extent they can be used efficiently.

UNIA, the Belgian Equal Opportunity body, is another central institution for the mainstreaming of Roma inclusion. It is an independent public institution, competent across federal level public authorities, but also in the Region and Communities. It is the main

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<sup>2</sup> Files with the recommendations of the National Roma Platform for each thematic meeting available at: <https://www.mi-is.be/>

institution in charge of combatting discrimination based on criteria protected by the legislation in place.<sup>3</sup>

UNIA is a member of the steering committee of the National Roma Platform and has (at least) two formal meetings with the NRP every year. Outside of the national level, UNIA also reportedly networks on the issues faced by Roma and Travellers at the European level (OPRE, Equinet), and at Regional and local level, including with Roma and Travellers representatives.

Additionally, the Belgian Equal Opportunity body plays an advisory role: recently, recommendations were made to the Government on educational and residential segregation of the Roma community. UNIA usually insures consultation of civil society representatives when formulating its recommendations to the authorities. UNIA provided dozens of other recommendations to the National and Regional Governments of Belgium that were not specifically targeting Roma but mainly having to do with discrimination overall, in the fields of housing, employment, health and education.

The Service against Poverty, Precarity and Social exclusion was created by the Federal Government, by the three language Communities and by the three Regions. Its goal is to evaluate the efficiency of the fundamental rights of people living in disadvantaged socio-economic conditions: right to housing, to energy, to protection of family life, to social protection, to access to healthcare, et at. To do so, this service organises in-depth consultations with social services, professionals and grassroots organisations, and elaborate recommendations for politicians on that basis. This service also produces regular thematic reports characterized by a large participation of the civil society and by detailed reporting by people experiencing poverty. As an indication, in 2017, the service produced reports on "citizenship and poverty" and on "housing and poverty".<sup>4</sup> For each report, the service is trying to address implications for Roma and Travellers.

The *Minderhedenforum* (Forum of Minorities) is a Flemish platform meant to express the voices of ethnic and cultural minorities.<sup>5</sup> The *Minderhedenforum* develops actions and perspectives in consultation with its member organisations, and presents policy recommendations to decision-makers and the wider society. The *Minderhedenforum* is also often consulted concerning the implementation of the activities of the National Roma Platform, and monitors the participation of the target groups in the implementation of the national strategy in Flanders.

In Flanders, the *VZW Integratie-Inburgering* is an external independent agency that is in charge of the implementation of the Flemish integration policies and decrees. Since 2015, the *VZW Integratie-Inburgering* includes reception offices for immigrants, integration centres, the *Kruispunt Migratie-Integratie*, translation and interpretation services, and *de Huizen van het Nederlands*. The *VZW Integratie-Inburgering* works closely with the relevant branches of the Flemish government in Flanders and in Brussels (notably the Federal Public Service for Social Integration), as well as with the National Roma Platform.

Belgium presented its national strategy for Roma inclusion in February 2012. This document was meant to be the result of the joint work of federal entities, federal authorities and civil society representatives. Several Roma/Travellers organisations and representatives were consulted. However, some questioned to what extent their opinion was actually taken into consideration in the final content of the strategy. On this ground, soon after the strategy was released, several civil society organisations involved in the

<sup>3</sup> Those criteria are: race, handicap, philosophical and religious convictions, sexual orientation, age, financial resources, civil status, political convictions, syndical convictions, health, physical or genetic characteristics, and social origin.

<sup>4</sup> These reports and others are available at: <http://www.luttepauvrete.be/publicationsautresgeneral.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Includes about 15 Flemish federations of associations of ethnic-cultural minorities including Moroccans, Turks, Italians, Latin Americans and Russians.

consultation process distanced themselves from its content (notably the CIRE and the CMGV through a press release).<sup>6</sup>

At the federal level, a National Council of Roma, Sinti and Travellers (National Roma Council) was created by the Minister to Equal Opportunities following the production of the national strategy. However, this new entity has been the object of contestations, particularly coming from the Roma civil society, part of which did not consider it a legitimate representative and reiterated their wish to be involved in the spheres of national discussions. It is the case of the National Gypsy Congress,<sup>7</sup> a self-organised organisation which published a paper criticizing the creation of the National Roma Council in *Dépêches Tsiganes* (23 August 2012). Additionally, the National Roma Council is no longer active according to the Belgian State Journal (*Moniteur Belge*) and different former members, its previous president resigned back in January 2016.

The four dialogue meetings organised by the National Roma Platform gathered some spokesperson of the Roma/Travellers communities, and invited Roma/Travellers representatives as guest speakers. However, many in the civil society, including the CIRE and the CMGV, question whether this consultation of some in the Roma community is truly sufficient. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, there are no longer Roma/Travellers in the steering Committee of the National Roma Platform.

In Flanders, the *Minderhedenforum* confirms that still today, Roma and Travellers are not involved in the development of policies targeting them, or at least not first line. The *Minderhedenforum* is often consulted and can pass on recommendations or grievances coming from the communities, but our interlocutor is unsure that these recommendations are taken into account, notably because the political priorities often differ or do not match the needs of the target groups.

All of those observations are disconcerting, particularly since the Belgian strategy insists on several occasions on the principles of reciprocity and participation, demanding that Roma people actively involve in their socio-economic integration. In an answer to an open letter from a Senate member,<sup>8</sup> Maggie de Block (at the time State Secretary to Asylum, Immigration and Social Integration) specified that "the participation of Roma to society and their empowerment in this regard is a central and horizontal objective of the strategy". (2012)

Fortunately, it is to be noted that there is an active political involvement amongst self-organised Travellers organisations, notably the "National Travellers Committee" (*Comité National des Gens du Voyage*): over the past few years, several meetings were organised with Ministry representatives on the Committee President's own initiative.

### **Consultations with the civil society**

The civil society was consulted in the elaboration process of the national strategy for Roma Integration. Since then, the National Roma Platform is the main device in place for civil society consultation when it comes to policy production. Recommendations for changes and adjustments are done on the basis of a consultation of actors involved in the NRP.

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<sup>6</sup> «Commentaires à propos de la stratégie nationale pour l'intégration des Roms », CIRÉ, CMGVR, 2012. Available at: <https://www.cire.be/thematiques/politiques-migratoires/commentaires-a-propos-de-la-strategie-nationale-pour-l-integration-des-roms>

<sup>7</sup> This informal organisation gathers Belgian Roma historical personalities and has no legal and structural existence. But it regularly expresses opinion on public decision and events regarding Belgian Roma and Travelers.

<sup>8</sup> Open letter by Andre du Bus, 11 July 2013, available at: <https://www.andredubus.be/2013/07/11/strategie-nationale-dintegration-des-roms-et-lutte-contre-la-mendicite-infantile/>



When it comes to regional policies, each ministry has its own civil society interlocutors depending on their field of competence. For instance, the CMGV, the Foyer, the CIRE, de *Minderhedenforum* and other central actors are frequently consulted by the relevant ministries concerning the policies and measures to implement. They attempt, to the best of their capacities, to pass on the concerns of the target communities.

Independently, those grassroots organisations working with Roma also request meetings with the relevant national and regional authorities to inform them and discuss on matters that are relevant with regards to their competences. For instance, the CMGV, at the request of the National Travellers Committee, recently organised a meeting on the subjects of mobile economic activities and legal access to some profession with the Ministry of Middle Classes.

The CIRE (Coordination and Initiatives for Refugees and Foreigners) is a non-profit organisation which works with paperless and asylum seekers populations and has developed an experience with Roma. More specifically, the CIRE focuses on families that are "said to be Roma" and live in situations of "permanent and restless wandering", a problem which Belgian authorities seem to voluntarily ignore. Since 2012, the CIRE has focused its efforts on helping these families getting out of the vicious circles they are stuck in, as well as on awareness raising work.

In 2013, an inter-associations work group called the Platform for Families in Situation of Permanent Wandering (*Familles en Errance*) was created, gathering the CIRE, the *Ligue des Droits de l'Homme* (Human Right League), *Médecins du Monde* (World's Doctors), the FOYER, Amnesty International and the association *Rom en Rom*. In the face of increasing numbers of forced evictions, this group was meant to reflect on sustainable solutions for these families sent out to the streets. The workgroup sent a manifesto to the representatives of Brussels-Capital Region, which claimed the respect of fundamental principles for a proper social support of these families: the stabilisation of their situation in a safe place providing for long accommodation, close social assistance allowing for settling in the Belgian society, and their access to citizens and social rights.<sup>9</sup>

The workgroup also organised a conference on the subject in collaboration with the municipality of Saint-Josse-ten-Noode (Brussels), titled "Proposition of measures to implement for the inclusion of wandering migrant families". The aim was to gather Belgian political representatives to inform them on the peculiar situation of these families and suggest that the regional level should be in charge of their support.

The CIRE and other members of the "Platform Families in Situation of Permanent and Restless Wandering" were invited and actively participated to the thematic meetings and production of the NRP.

## Mainstreaming Roma inclusion across local authorities

### ***Institutional bodies promoting Roma and Travellers inclusion amongst local authorities and services***

At the federal level, the Ministry for Social Action, through the Federal Public Service for Social Integration (*SPP Integration Sociale/POD Maatschappelijke Beter Samen Leven*), is in charge of mainstreaming the concern for Roma inclusion and of checking upon law implementation amongst public social assistance centres at the local level.

Ever since its creation, UNIA (the Belgian Equal Opportunity body) has given special attention to the Roma and Travellers communities, and has usually placed a significant focus on local authorities. Reportedly, UNIA is expected to include good practices (in terms

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<sup>9</sup> A summary of the manifesto sent by the Platform for Families in Situation of Permanent Wandering is available online on the website of Amnesty (2013): <https://www.amnesty.be/infos/nos-blogs/archives/le-blog-de-claire-pecheux/article/familles-roms-en-errance-a>

of policies and actions) for Roma and Travellers in their recommendations for the next local elections.

In the Flemish Region, there is an action plan specifically targeting Eastern and Central European migrants (see above). Concerning the national strategy for Roma inclusion, there is an impression amongst some social workers, involved on the site owned by the city of Gent, that the National Strategy for the Integration of Roma has merely been a "declaration of intent" and that it has not been disseminated widely enough along services and collaborators involved, much less amongst the different beneficiary group themselves.

In Flanders, the *VZW Integratie-Inburgering* is in charge of implementing the Flemish integration policies and decrees (notably the civil integration program: a year of civic lessons and Flemish language classes plus counselling for socio-professional trajectory). They offer information and tailored guidance to local authorities and services with regards to diversity management. Some employees within the *VZW Integratie-Inburgering* have specific expertise on the Roma and Travellers communities. Additionally, the head office of *VZW Integratie-Inburgering* is currently working on creating a web tool in which all good practices - but also policy documents, reports and research - for Roma and Travellers inclusion are collected for later access.

Two cities in Flanders have their own *Integratie-Inburgering* agencies:

- In Antwerp, the *Integratie-Inburgering* Agency (ATLAS - in transition) has a Roma service composed of Roma mediators ("bridge figures") who work with Roma families on educational and neighbourhood cohabitation matters. They develop methodologies and networks in order to address multi-problems situations. They currently work on an approach to tackle forced marriages.
- In Gent, the *Integratie-Inburgering* Agency (In-Gent) does not have any employees working directly with Roma because this area is mostly managed by the city of Gent.

Over the past few years, several Flemish cities have produced their own policies for the inclusion of EU migrants, including Roma and Travellers. These plans highly rely on the implication of Roma mediators. Their focus is the information of communities and services, and on the coordination between local authorities/services and the civil society. For instance, the strategy at play in Gent has reportedly proven to be quite successful with regards to Roma housing and employment.

Concerning the Travellers community, already in 2000, the Flemish Community has signed a decree financing up to 90 per cent (sometimes completed by the Provinces) of the acquisition and accommodation costs of residential sites for Travellers. Since 2004, the Flemish authorities cover 100 per cent of the costs. Up until now, Flanders have acquired 5 temporary stay sites and 30 residential sites. According to a 2006 estimation, those sites cover for 60 to 70 per cent of Travellers' needs for accommodation.<sup>10</sup>

In Wallonia, the Walloon Region offers an integration path program for foreign migrants residing in Belgium. To avoid more exclusion and prejudice, Roma migrants are considered as other immigration families, without any focus on them. The integration path program mostly consists of French language courses and citizenship training. It is free, soon to be compulsory, and is implemented by Regional Centres for Integration. A few of those regional centres, such as the CeRAIC (La Louvière), the CAI (Namur) and CRVI (Verviers), organise trainings and information sessions for professionals about Roma, in partnership with the Roma and Travellers Mediation Centre.

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<sup>10</sup> G. Rulens, "Les Gens du Voyage dans nos villes", *Les Echos du logement*. no.1 (March 2006): 32-36.  
Available at:  
[http://spw.wallonie.be/dgo4/tinymvc/apps/echos/views/documents/echos/echo2006\\_20141023095612.pdf](http://spw.wallonie.be/dgo4/tinymvc/apps/echos/views/documents/echos/echo2006_20141023095612.pdf)

The Walloon Region specifically promotes Roma socio-professional insertion through its support of the CMGVR. This organisation develops information, lobbying and trainings activities with both Roma/Travellers and services/institutions/local authorities. As an example, partnerships are concluded with public employment services (FOREM) to benefit from their specific jobs database to inform Roma organisations.

For what concerns the Travellers community specifically, the Walloon Region (DG Housing, DG Social Action, DG Employment, Interdepartmental Direction for Social Cohesion and local authorities) sets up incentive measures aiming for the organisation of Travellers' temporary stay in Walloon localities. Up to 2017, 11 municipalities got involved in this project and received subsidies from the Walloon Region

In Brussels, following different calls for proposals from the Region of Brussels,<sup>11</sup> more and more municipalities get involved into Roma integration projects, notably through their public social assistance centres (CPAS) and Prevention and Proximity Services. Back in 2015, the CIRE and the CMGVR reacted and commented on a proposition of the call for proposals, and the Minister's cabinet took most remarks into account. The CIRE has then been consulted by several CPAS before they introduced their projects. Under the projects launched, field actors (associations, municipalities and CPAS) exchanged good practices and created partnerships.

- Example of a project that originated from this call for proposals: in Molenbeek (Brussels), the Roma organisation *MolenRom*<sup>12</sup> is attached to the municipality through the Prevention Service and the support of the Cell against Social Exclusion (social service attached to the municipality of Molenbeek and has developed expertise with the Roma population). *MolenRom* works on the empowerment of the Roma community and on improving its relationships to the rest of society. The organisation was created in 2016 and has its own office with a permanent activity since January 2017, which is relatively rare in Belgium.
- Another example: the municipality of Anderlecht supports KHAM,<sup>13</sup> a Roma-lead organisation which focuses on the youth, in its weekly activities with Roma children. This organisation supports the implication of young Roma people in the services of the municipality, as well as in other structures, NGOs, and to use the means at their disposal in their municipal structures.

Additionally, in Brussels, the question of Roma inclusion, particularly that of families in situation of homelessness, is also mainstreamed across local authorities through the project Housing First.<sup>14</sup>

It can also be noted that in Brussels, the CIRE participates to the social coordination meetings of the COCOM's (Joint Community Commission) to present the problematic of families in situation of wandering to the municipalities, to the CPAS, and to the task force. The CIRE insures the follow-up and evaluation of the pilot programs set up for the accompaniment of wandering Roma families in some municipalities of Brussels.

For what concerns Travellers, until recently, there were no significant subsidies for the acquisition and development of Travellers sites in Brussels. But the call for proposals of the Region of Brussels (end of 2015) offers subsidies for the creation and accommodation of Travellers sites. However, there is currently no official site dedicated to hosting

<sup>11</sup> All calls for proposals launched by the Region of Brussels are available at: <https://www.avcb-vsgb.be/fr/subsides/appels-a-projets.html>

<sup>12</sup> No website available but the organisation has a Facebook page: "Molenrom".

<sup>13</sup> No website available but the organisation has a Facebook page: "KHAM vzw".

<sup>14</sup> For further details see: <http://www.housingfirstbelgium.be/en/>

Travellers in Brussels. End 2011, one site was inaugurated in Haren, but it closed after a year due to building work, and it never reopened.

### ***The role of grassroots organisations: consultation and supervision of local authorities and services***

Grassroots organisations and the civil society play a crucial role in mainstreaming Roma inclusion amongst local authorities and services. They provide sensitisation and action tools to local actors with conferences, trainings and supervision to improve Roma inclusion, and for a better organisation of Travellers' temporary stay.

In Flanders, the *Minderhedenforum* reportedly passes on the concerns of Roma and Travellers communities to the relevant authorities and institutions and promotes their inclusion on all possible platforms and consultations (notably in the frame of partnerships or counselling sessions with local authorities and public services).

Grassroots organisations in Flanders address provincial authorities to request more Travellers' sites and bring attention to the need for education subsidies to local authorities. (e.g. collaborators of the Travellers site in Gent)

Roma and Travellers Mediation centre (CMGVR) is frequently involved in the local projects for the creation of temporary sites for Travellers, but also in the follow-up through (bi)annual support committees. The CMGVR provides trainings, punctual supervisions to local authorities and services, as well as to a wide diversity of services (health care staffers, social workers, school administrations, police) concerning both the Roma and the Travellers community. The CMGVR also organises several public conferences every year on key matters concerning Roma (in 2017: Roma families living in homelessness<sup>15</sup>) and Travellers (in 2017: managing Travellers temporary stay<sup>16</sup>). The CMGVR organised the first Roma mediation training in Belgium in 2010 and is continuously involved in life-long trainings for Roma social workers.

In Brussels, the Roma and Travellers service of the *Foyer* works on the inclusion of Roma and Travellers mainly by providing information, support to Roma families and sensitisation of the authorities. The *Foyer* is particularly in contact with schools, social services, judicial services and other public institutions which meet Roma and/or Travellers in their daily work. The *Foyer* works also with Roma mediators.

Another relevant organisation is *Bruxelles Laïque*,<sup>17</sup> a non-profit association from Brussels. Although *Brussels Laïque* does not work directly or specifically with Roma and Travellers communities, this organisation has actively lobbied for better Roma inclusion by including their issues in big events (*Festival des Libertés*), by participating in different Roma inclusion platforms (*Familles en Errance*) and by developing information to prevent prejudice against Roma through conferences and publications. In that sense, *Bruxelles Laïque* has helped mainstreaming Roma inclusion at the regional level.

### ***Involvement of Roma and Travellers in mainstreaming their inclusion amongst local authorities/services***

As mentioned earlier, Roma and Travellers organisations and spokespersons are not given a significant political voice, outside from mere consultation on specific measures or policies targeting them (on the national level and on the local levels). Additionally, consultations

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<sup>15</sup> Conference on homeless Roma families, organised by the CMGV in June 2017 in the city of la Louvière: <http://www.mediation4roma.be/index.php/actualite/71-familles-roms-sans-abris-mercredi-14-juin-2017-a-la-louviere>

<sup>16</sup> The CMGVR organises frequent conferences on the organisation of Travellers' temporary stay. For instance, recently, in Brussels (November 2016) and in Namur (May 2017). Details available at: <http://www.cmqv.be>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.bxllaique.be/>

are generally asked for by the Roma/Travellers community representatives themselves, and supported by grassroots organisations, rather than initiated by the authorities.

Roma are mostly involved at the local level as mediators and “neighbourhood stewards” (also known as “*brugfiguren*” in Flemish, which refer to their mission of bridging between communities in multicultural neighbourhoods). Over the last few years, several municipalities started recruiting Roma mediators, who are often attached to the public social assistance centres or to prevention or proximity services. Mediators are widely reported to play a crucial role in facilitating both the communication with Roma and their inclusion in the wider society.

As far as we know, except for one municipality in Wallonia, no Traveller is hired as a mediator or contact person by the municipalities involved in the organisation of Travellers’ temporary stay.

A significant part of Roma mediators is working in civil society organisations (the CMGV, *Foyer*, ATLAS Antwerpen, ASBL Diogène, SeTIS Brussels). Their role is to facilitate communication and cooperation between Roma/Travellers families and schools, administrations, health care services. And for the Travellers groups, they help negotiating temporary stay with local authorities and attempt to prevent forced evictions.

### Promoting empowerment and participation of Roma

As mentioned earlier, a National Roma Council was created under the Belgian strategy, but it is no longer operative. This does not mean that national authorities do not have informal connexions with the Roma civil society, but there is currently no group of Roma representatives officially recognised at the national level.

On the Travellers’ side, there is a National Travellers Committee. It is a self-organised organisation recognized by politicians and by the media. It benefits from the support of the Walloon Region, but is not yet recognized as an official advisory body. Still, the President of the National Travellers Committee frequently requests meetings with national authorities, and takes part in conferences and trainings for local officials, members of the Police and field workers.

The political implication of Roma and Travellers representatives is limited to non-binding consultation processes that are occasionally organised in the elaboration of policies, measures and recommendations targeting their communities (notably in the elaboration of the national strategy for Roma inclusion and in the meetings of the Roma National Platform). It is challenging for the community representatives to make their voices heard, especially since supporting their needs and grievances is perceived by many as detrimental politically.

At the local level, there are several self-organised Roma and Travellers associations, in all three Regions of Belgium. Some of these organisations are politically involved (for instance the *Congrès National Gitan* (National Gypsy Congress) and the *Evangelische Zigeunersmissie* (Evangelical Gypsy Mission)), but most act on a local level, helping out families in need and advising social services. However, there is a strong willingness within the Roma/Travellers civil society to voice their concern in the political sphere.

Funds are accessible to all. However, the means and expertise needed for introducing a funding project or answering a call for tender are so high that the majority of Roma and Travellers organisations who do not have the necessary means or expertise cannot make it.

Nation-wide, the main non-Roma organisations working with Roma and Travellers, such as the CMGVR, the *Foyer*, the *Kruispunt Migratie*, the *Minderhedenforum*, but also smaller scale organisations, attempt to support the presence of Roma and Travellers organisations/spokespersons on the discussion tables. They do so notably by organising meetings between community members and national/regional/local authorities, and by

inviting Roma and Travellers as guest speakers in conferences and trainings targeting public services. The ambition is to support their implication in municipal services, to relay their claims to local authorities, and to promote activities based on local needs.

On the ground, some field workers also attempt to base their activities on the needs expressed by the communities. For instance, in Gent, the collaborators working on the Travellers' site are in daily contact with Travellers and aim at including as much as possible their visions, needs and opinions into concrete proposals.

### **Municipal inclusion efforts and strategies**

In the frame of specific municipal projects, some public social services partner up with these Roma and Travellers organisations/spokespersons in order to insure a degree of coordination, and to adopt an informed approach to the Roma community in their actions and provision of services. Those local public services support their Roma partners in the frame of their work by diffusing information, networking, promoting partnerships.

Some municipalities in Brussels develop their own local strategy/project:

- For instance, since 2015, the Municipality of Anderlecht has its own action plan: they partnered up with the *Foyer* to facilitate contact with the Roma community, developed their street work and hired a Roma mediator for the Prevention Service in January 2017. This service promotes Roma empowerment through social assistance and schooling support, but also develops many activities focused on the community and on the youth. In the frame of a European project, exchanges are organised between Anderlecht and a municipality in Bulgaria (between social workers of different services). This summer, the Prevention Service of the Municipality of Anderlecht participated in an international youth project on the holocaust: ten young people from the municipality, including Roma and Travellers, were sent to Auschwitz for a five-days international meeting. Three people, including one Travellers were also sent to Bulgaria for a project focused on the youth.
- Another example in Brussels is the Municipality of Molenbeek, where several Roma mediators and "peacekeepers" work at the Prevention Service. Roma people living in Molenbeek are also hired as municipal employees, with the idea that municipality employees should represent the cultural diversity of the neighbourhood.

### **Belgium's involvement in the ROMED training program**

Since 2012, Belgium is involved in ROMED, the European training program for Roma mediators. The training cycles are organised in the frame of the national strategy for Roma Integration, with the main objective of fostering the participation and empowerment of the Roma population within the Belgian society.

In 2012, 23 mediators of mixed background were trained. In 2015, 19 health mediators were trained, and 11 more in June 2016. In October 2016, 40 people were trained, from different organisations (schools, police, social cohesion representatives, human resources management, social assistants). This last training was not certified as such: it was more of an information session. Arguably, it is a matter of concern that all these professionals now categorized as "Roma mediators" have not received the same training, and that very few (or not any) of them actually belong to the Roma or Travellers communities. Furthermore, only a part of the mediators who have received these trainings are actually involved with Roma/Travellers communities.

### **Civil society's access to funding for Roma inclusion activities**

NGO's with a social and/or cultural orientation have access to general public funding to fight exclusion, promote race and gender equality, support social and educative promotion, foster migrant inclusion. In this respect, they focus their projects on Roma inclusion.

However, some important funding measures are only available for public tenders (mainly local authorities, CPAS, Provinces). This is the case for example in Wallonia where these authorities can finance Travellers sites building. The same restriction exists in Brussels where the regional government funds Roma inclusion projects introduced by local authorities. The Federal social integration service (NRCP) support financially Roma mediation project of CPAS. We notice that Roma and Travellers and NGO'S, because of their lack of human and financial resources, have no real access to funding for their activities.

### Availability of reliable data on the situation of Roma

To this day, estimations on the number of Roma people living in Belgium remain quite vague. The Belgian strategy seems to imply that it is not conceivable to develop efficient policies, nor to state any scientific reality without collecting reliable data. Once again, this is tantamount to denying the fact that the collection of ethnic data is illegal in Belgium.

This prohibition is established by the Law of the 8 December 1992 on Privacy Protection regarding the Collection of Personal Data. The 6<sup>th</sup> article states: "*Processing personal data revealing racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical convictions, union membership, as well as sexual orientation, is forbidden*".

However, it must be said that in Belgium, this general interdiction of ethnic data collection is often loosened and stretched in the facts when it is justified by a need for statistical treatment. In Belgium, the ways in which discrimination and data collection are approached differ from one Region to another. Wallonia remains in a relatively restrictive frame when it comes to the production of "ethnic categories", while the Flemish Community authorises certain forms of data collection. (Study Report ECRI, Patrick Simon, *Institut National d'Etudes Démographiques*, 2007)

Back in 2012, the CIRE accused the Belgian strategy to "serve other interests than Roma integration"<sup>18</sup> and to transform Roma in political objects. One reason for these accusations lies in the fact that the strategy seemed to support the collection of ethnic data, and that it advocated for stricter migration policies rather than supporting the insertion of the populations targeted in the first place.

At the CMGVR, attention is drawn on the fact that what really matters is not collecting data on specific policy areas and issues, but to understand the need for a better knowledge and deeper understanding of the situation of the Roma communities, both in their home countries and in Belgium, in order to develop a much needed cross-cutting approach in social work with Roma. Similarly, there seem to be little in-depth comprehension of the mobile lifestyle of Travellers.

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<sup>18</sup> CIRE, CMGV, (2012). «Commentaires à propos de la Stratégie nationale pour l'intégration des Roms». Available at: <https://www.cire.be/thematiques/politiques-migratoires/commentaires-a-propos-de-la-strategie-nationale-pour-l-integration-des-roms>

# ANTI-DISCRIMINATION

## Implementing the Racial Equality Directive

The Racial Equality Directive has been transposed in the Belgian law, and at the different levels of authorities (national and regional). However, the report of the Evaluation Commission of Anti-Discriminatory Federal Laws (February 2017), highlights the fact that this legislation lacks effectiveness. Access to justice for victims of discrimination is impaired by different obstacles, notably the fact that it is still difficult for victims to prove the discrimination they have faced. As reported by the Human Rights League, while empirical studies conducted by NGOs or researchers show that discrimination on ethnic grounds is high, the number of condemnations for racial discrimination remains significantly low.

In a publication of 8 March 2013 (International Roma Day), UNIA declared that a year after the publication of the strategy, discriminations perpetrated against Roma were still occurring and remained unchallenged.<sup>19</sup> This allegation still stands today.

Likewise, our interlocutors amongst grassroots organisations do not feel that – up until this date - this Directive has had a lot of influence in preventing discrimination towards Roma and Travellers. Furthermore, it is clear the difficulty of collecting proofs of discrimination and racism, in spite of the reversal of the burden of proof.

On a side note, it can be noted that the Article 8 of the directive requires Member States to allow for the burden of proof to be shared between the claimant and the respondent in cases of discrimination. Belgium is one of the few Member States that allowed the use of 'situation testing' in order to prove the existence of discrimination.

### *UNIA's missions with regards to Roma and Travellers*

In its capacity of Belgian Equal Opportunity Body, UNIA promotes the fight against discrimination within society as a whole, and most particularly within public authorities and companies. Concomitantly, UNIA supports, informs and accompanies ordinary citizens who have been victims or witnesses of discrimination. UNIA also conducts campaigns (on equal opportunities and on the fight against discrimination), issues recommendations to authorities and produces tools, publications and statistics.

UNIA offers a service of individual support and assistance for victims of discrimination. This service handles any submitted reporting of discrimination, in the frame of interviews, or via the daily telephone permanence, or through online reporting on UNIA's website. These devices are available at UNIA's headquarters and are completed by local services in different cities of Flanders and Wallonia. These local services have established contacts and permanent collaboration with local administrations and with civil society. Roma and Travellers who believe they have been victims of discrimination or hate speech can thus turn to UNIA.

### *Roma and Travellers discrimination complaints*

When it comes to Roma and Travellers' discrimination complaints, the annual reports published by UNIA<sup>20</sup> show that in 2014, UNIA opened 30 discrimination cases, mostly linked to chain e-mails and hate speech. The violent behaviour of some police officers towards Roma/Travellers populations led to a significant number of reports.<sup>21</sup> In 2015, UNIA opened 22 discrimination cases, nine of which concerned discriminatory/hate speech against

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<sup>19</sup> UNIA, (2013). "Journée Internationale des Roms: le Centre met l'accent sur la sensibilisation". Available at: <https://www.unia.be/fr/articles/journee-internationale-des-roms-le-centre-met-laccent-sur-la-sensibilisation>

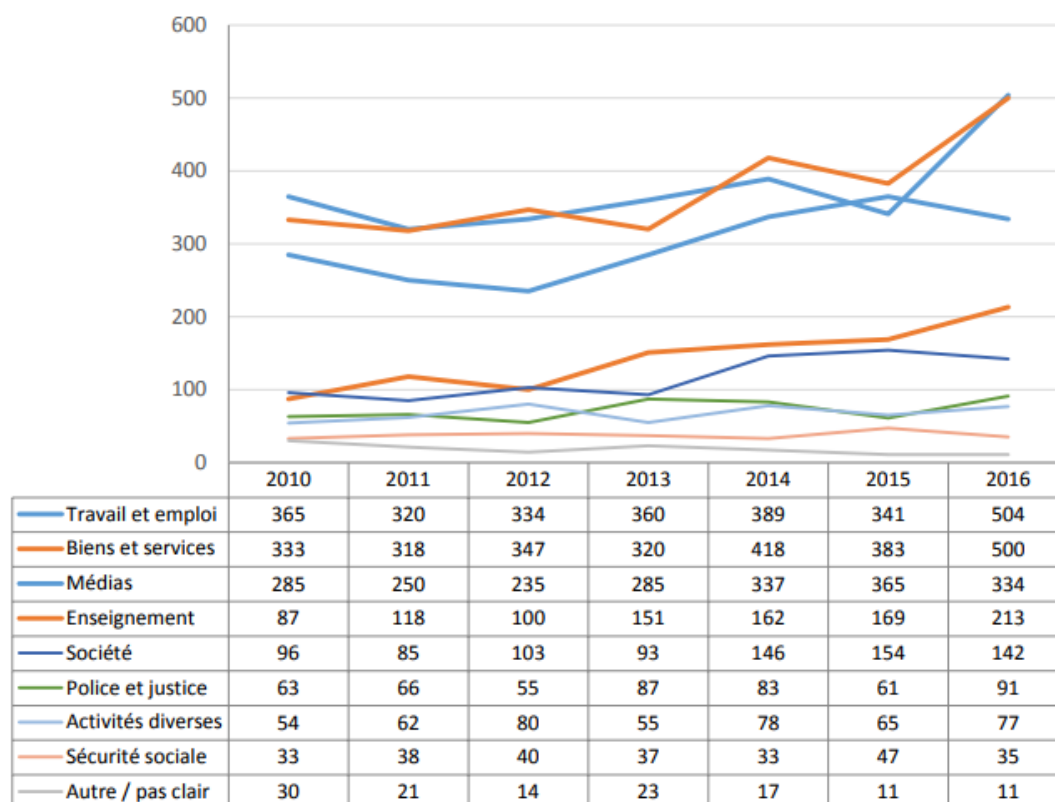
<sup>20</sup> UNIA's annual reports are available at the official website: <http://www.unia.be>

<sup>21</sup> UNIA's 2014 annual report available at: [https://www.unia.be/files/Documenten/Jaarrapport/chiffres\\_2014.pdf](https://www.unia.be/files/Documenten/Jaarrapport/chiffres_2014.pdf)



Roma/Travellers in the media.<sup>22</sup> In 2016, UNIA opened 18 cases concerning Roma and Travellers populations. Compared to 2015, there was more diversity in the domains those cases pertained to. One case out of three was related to product and services, notably differentiated price charges for communal services. Society-related challenges also represent one out of three files. Lastly, 22 per cent of cases concerned hate speech/incitement to hatred towards these populations.<sup>23</sup>

The diagram below shows, the evolution of discrimination incidents concerning Roma and Travellers per domain since 2010 (this chart shows complaints, not opened cases):



Through the years, it is difficult not to notice the prominent role played by the media in the development of a negative image of these populations, as well as the high numbers of discriminatory behaviours coming from people in positions of power.

For instance, in 2013, UNIA mentioned in its yearly report cases of local authorities and public social assistance centre representatives refusing registration in their locality or refusing the provision of emergency medical aid, as well as the case of a school director refusing to enrol a child, a case of blackmailing by a police officer, etc.

### ***A phenomenon of underreporting amongst Roma and Travellers***

While UNIA treats a significant number of complaints every year (according to their website, more in 2016 than in a long time), they receive very few complaints of alleged discrimination experienced by Roma or Travellers.

According to all accounts, discriminatory behaviours faced by Roma are highly underreported. This phenomenon of underreporting amongst Roma and Travellers populations might find an explanation in a certain degree of distrust held towards public

<sup>22</sup> UNIA's 2015 annual report available at:  
[https://www.unia.be/files/Documenten/Jaarrapport/chiffres\\_2015.pdf](https://www.unia.be/files/Documenten/Jaarrapport/chiffres_2015.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> UNIA's 2016 annual report available at:  
[https://www.unia.be/files/Documenten/Jaarrapport/Rapport\\_chiffres\\_2016\\_def.pdf](https://www.unia.be/files/Documenten/Jaarrapport/Rapport_chiffres_2016_def.pdf)

institutions, but also in the prevalence of other more immediate needs. Consultation with Roma and Travellers spokespersons confirmed that Roma and Travellers are reluctant to activate the necessary procedure to lodge a complaint because they distrust the institutions and do not believe in the efficacy of formal proceedings.

As it was highlighted by social services and mediators in Brussels, another reason for underreporting is that discriminatory behaviours often take place within their neighbourhood, which makes it difficult to lodge a complaint without fearing for retaliation.

### **Assessing the work of the Belgian Equal Opportunity Body**

According to our interlocutors amongst the civil society and grassroots organisations, in Belgium, the Equal Opportunity Body hardly engages in legal proceedings for a private individual complaint: rather, it brings up complaints that are potentially linked to widespread discrimination, namely where there is no identifiable victim, when patterns of discrimination can be established, or as a public interest action.

According to many in the civil society, the phenomenon of underreporting of discriminatory behaviours perpetrated against Roma and Travellers calls for proactive outreaching efforts on the part of UNIA in order to reinforce the accessibility of legal protection mechanisms. This should be facilitated by the fact that UNIA is decentralised into several regional offices, which should allow for proximity and a better knowledge of field issues. A Roma mediator suggested that UNIA should organise a few-days awareness-raising campaign to inform and communicate with the Roma community, and to build mutual trust.

Concerns were raised about the fact that the fight against human trafficking was recently added to UNIA's missions. This additional competence raises concern amongst the civil society, notably because it led to a close focus on Roma and begging, drawing a clear connection between Roma population and criminal organisations in the public opinion. This conflict of priorities leads to confusion regarding UNIA's role and makes the issue of Roma inclusion secondary.

It is to be noted that at least three cases of police intimidation and suspicion of racism towards Travellers and Roma were recently reported to UNIA, but none of them received further follow-up from the Belgian Equal Opportunity Body.

However, it is crucial to underline that UNIA has always been active in fight against antigypsyism, ever since its creation and well before the Racial Equality Directive was produced. UNIA initiated and participated in information and awareness raising campaigns, lobbying activities towards the authorities, systematic political recommendations for each election (local, regional, federal) and supports NGOs whenever requested.

### **Educational and residential segregation**

In Belgium, the educational segregation of Roma children is highly linked to economic deprivation. During the visit of the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe in Belgium (September 2015),<sup>24</sup> interlocutors reported "*frequent enrolment denials of Roma children, notably in the Brussels region, on grounds that the schools cannot cater for the needs of these disadvantaged children*". Additionally, in many cases, school attendance is impaired by the deep poverty some families live in, which is often paired with restless and permanent wanderings due to situations of homelessness.

Grassroots organisations working with Roma confirm these phenomena. However, mediation work sometimes proves useful for finding agreements with school personnel. For instance, in recent years, the CMGVR noted that several school directions (notably in the

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<sup>24</sup> Muiznieks, Nils. "Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, Following his visit to Belgium from 14 to 18 September 2015." Council of Europe. Available at: <https://wcd.coe.int/com.instranet.InstraServlet?command=com.instranet.CmdBlobGet&InstranetImage=2879548&SecMode=1&DocId=2349344&Usage=2>.

Provinces of Namur, Hainaut and Charleroi) took it upon themselves to insure part of the schooling costs of Roma children.

In Belgium, school segregation does not have as much as a geographical dimension as in Roma's home countries. There is a high concentration of Roma students in some schools, notably in Brussels (Schaerbeek, Saint-Josse, Molenbeek, Anderlecht and other), but it mostly has to do with the fact that these schools are located in multicultural neighbourhoods of the capital. However, some reports indicate that Roma children are sometimes sent by other schools into these schools characterized by a higher number of Roma students.

According to reports, there seems to be a high number of Roma children sent to specialized education, for causes related to poverty, language barriers or behavioural/learning difficulties.<sup>25</sup> UNIA drew attention to this issue in recent recommendations to the government.

Some programs attempt to tackle these issues. In Brussels and in Flanders, Roma stewards insure substantive work in a few schools to support teachers and students more intensively in their schooling process.

In Wallonia, the CMGVR offers school support in a high school in Charleroi and facilitates enrolments of Roma children through orientation and mediation work. Some Regional Integration Centres, such as the CeRAIC act as intermediaries between schools and parents and refer them to translators and interpreters. Additionally, in the frame of a European Social Fund project, a secondary school in Charleroi has hired a Roma mediator to support Roma children school inclusion, to improve communication with the parents, and to combat school drop-outs.

### ***The educational segregation of Travellers' children***

In Belgium, the school education of Travellers' children is highly impaired by the lack of available sites for Travellers, which makes it difficult to settle and give proper attention to the children's school education. Another significant obstacle lies in the fact that the school system is not adapted to a mobile lifestyle (little flexibility in school enrolments, lack of training/information amongst teachers) Our interlocutors underline that there is very little (political) will and interest in dealing with the challenges and the lack of an educational offer.

Recently, UNIA made recommendations to the Belgian government concerning educational opportunities for Travellers' children. In 2016, UNIA launched a project that consist of an exploratory survey on the participation in education of Travellers' children. The main results of this survey will be brought to light in a broader report on discrimination and education, which will come out in February 2018. The Belgian Equal Opportunity Body is also in direct contact with the Flemish administration of education in an attempt to establish a committee on the education of Travellers' children. This goal should be adopted in the frame of the Flemish inclusive strategy on integration.

It should be noted that since 2004, the CMGVR offers on-site school support classes for Travellers' children, focusing on language learning and calculations.

### ***Addressing the residential segregation of Roma***

Belgium has long been able to avoid the emergence of shanty towns such as those observed in France along the highways. However, over the past few years, fieldworkers from several of the main Belgian cities have witnessed the early development of slums

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<sup>25</sup> Elias Hemelsoet, "Whose problem is it anyway? Realising the right to education for Roma children in Ghent, Belgium." Romani studies, 1-21. Liverpool University Press, 2015.

inhabited mostly by people of Roma descent.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, it is difficult not to note a growing number of families living in situations of permanent wandering, a phenomenon that coincides with an increase in the number of squats and illegal building occupations. In most cases, local authorities fail in providing those families with alternative accommodation, which leaves them in extremely worrisome situations.

Since 2014, the Region of Brussels, the COCOM (Joint Community Commission), several municipalities and public social assistance centres pay close attention to families in situation of permanent wandering in Brussels. That is how since 2015, public social assistance centres can benefit of a special subvention from the government of the Region of Brussels-Capital (850,000 EUR to be allocated accordingly to the distribution key of the Special Fund for Social Help) in order to lead social actions for four target groups including Roma and Travellers families. The Platform for Families in Situations of Permanent Wandering addresses residential segregation with its recommendations and interpellations of the political sphere concerning access to housing.

The Region of Brussels also opened an emergency centre in Woluwe-Saint-Lambert, for families in situation of wandering, and which will be sustained in Schaerbeek. This shelter is managed by the *Samusocial* and aims for providing a stable living space and an accompaniment based on empowerment and development of personal projects. However, the maximal duration stay is not always sufficient for some migrant Roma families, who are sent back to the streets after a year.

As mentioned earlier, the residential segregation of Travellers mostly has to do with the lack of available sites for temporary stay and urban planning issues on sites where they want to stay permanently. With regards to these matters, the Flemish Region will reportedly adopt a renewed strategy (with a focus on housing) within its inclusive integration policy. In Brussels, a committee has been established dealing with the question of housing of Travellers. In the Walloon Region, the Ministry for Social Action has been working on a bill that would, if it passes, oblige Provinces to establish sufficient temporary Travellers sites.

## Forced evictions

The lack of sites available for Travellers in Belgium creates numerous cases of unpermitted occupation of private and public land. Travellers spokespersons and civil society representatives report that still to this day, these situations hardly ever lead to propositions of alternative accommodation. "Hot potato politics" is a term frequently used to describe the behaviour of many amongst the local authorities, who keep passing the buck without taking responsibility for the problems at play. In Flanders and in Wallonia, field workers confirm that forced evictions of Travellers are very common and that the decision of authorizing Travellers' temporary stay still entirely depends on the goodwill of the local mayor. It must also be noted that in Wallonia, most encampment sites are closed during winter, despite the fact that many Travellers families are on the road all year long. As a reminder, there is no official site for Travellers' temporary stay.

Forced evictions in Belgium happen all year round, including winter and night, often with no alternative accommodation offered to the families. In this regard, on 12 March 2012, Belgium was condemned by the European Committee of Social Rights (ECSR) for being in violation of several rights protected by the European Social Charter.

Still, three years later, the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe stated after his visit to Belgium: "*according to several of the Commissioner's interlocutors, local authorities, which until now had regularly allowed Roma and Traveller families to stop and stay on their territory, increasingly proceed to evictions. Evictions are carried out all year*

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<sup>26</sup> See for instance the slum situation that occurred in Brussels (Laeken) in 2016: RTBF Info, Vandenbulcke, P. "Un bidonville en plein coeur de Brussels" (A slum in the heart of Brussels), April 16, 2016. Available at: [https://www.rtbef.be/info/regions/detail\\_un-bidonville-en-plein-c-ur-de-bruxelles?id=9269738](https://www.rtbef.be/info/regions/detail_un-bidonville-en-plein-c-ur-de-bruxelles?id=9269738)

*round, including in winter, and irrespective of the number of years spent on a site".* (September 2015)

If forced evictions are inherently violent episodes, some cases were particularly telling in that they displayed additional layers of open hostility and disdain towards Travellers. For instance in 2014, the mayor of a Flemish municipality (Landen) ordered to drive a Travellers group away by playing very loud music close by the encampment site. (It must be said that this political decision sparked protest, notably within the youth section of the mayor's party which organised a Gypsy music concert the following week in response). Comparatively, in June 2015, the Municipality of Marcinelle (Charleroi) dug trenches to prevent Travellers from stopping on a site located on their territory.

As mentioned earlier, over the past few years, several of the main Belgian cities have witnessed the early development of slums, inhabited mostly by people of Roma descent. Such phenomenon had been mostly avoided until then. Adding to that, situations of families living in squats also seem to be on the increase, in big and smaller cities of all three Belgian regions.

In most cases, these families have been subjected to frequent evictions for years. From one squat to another, their life is marked by permanent and restless wandering and thus by a hindered access to the most elementary social rights. According to the CIRE's estimations, there are about 300 to 400 people concerned by such situations in Brussels.

2013 was the year of a memorable event, where about 200 people were forcefully evicted by the same number of police officers, from a church in Saint-Josse-ten-Noode (Brussels). Most of them were Roma, and more than 90 of the inhabitants were children. Temporary accommodation was provided, but clearly not enough for all families.

According to the main grassroots organisations, notably the Foyer, the CMGV and the CIRE, alternative options of accommodation for Roma are still very rarely provided.

It must be noted that in 2017, Belgium has adopted a new law against squats. Ever since 2014, the Belgian government had been planning on strengthening the existing measures against squats. But the matter came back on the discussion table in March 2017, after the stir caused by the illegal occupation of a house by Roma families in Gent, while the owners were on holidays. Following this event, a law proposal was voted at the end of September 2017, penalising the illegal occupation of any real estate property. Up until then, no penal proceedings were at stake for squatters. With this new law, they risk up to a full month in prison, and this punishment extends up to a year if they refuse to leave the building. Evictions procedures are also accelerated under this law and are less costly for owners, and the deadlines for evictions are shortened. By penalizing the squatters, the focus is placed on the criminalisation of the poor rather than on the search for alternative solutions for their accommodation

### Discriminatory behaviour by police, misconduct by prosecutors or courts

Some mediators and field workers consulted in the frame of preparation of this report have reported cases of discrimination they witnessed or were told about in recent years, going from instances of Police violence to racist/stereotyping comments expressed by different public services (administration, hospitals, social assistance centres, prosecutors). For instance, in 2013, 14 railway policemen were prosecuted for mistreating homeless people in Brussels South train station, some of which were Roma.

Discrimination sometimes occurs in local administration. Members of the civil society report that many Roma, particularly those living in visible poverty, are denied enrolment on municipal registers, which not only can lead to withdrawals of residence permits, but also cuts access to a series of essential services for Roma. The discretionary power of administrative and social workers, while necessary and inherent to their work, inevitably increases the risk of discrimination towards marginalised and stigmatised communities.

The experience of grassroots organisations unequivocally shows that more often than not, Roma are treated with more severity and inflexibility, and sometimes with less respect.

Field workers report that it is particularly the case when it comes to family matters, where judicial decisions (e.g. placement of children) are taken in a way that suggests a trial of poverty, rather than that of actual mistreatment. Such harsh differential treatments are emblematic of the weight of images and of the collective imaginary when it comes to the Roma community.

In most cases, discriminatory behaviours hardly lead to favourable outcomes or official complaints. They thus remain unpunished, in some cases even when the local authorities are aware of their existence. e.g. Many reported cases of slumlords renting unsanitary housing and/or requesting exorbitant payment from their tenants, often paired with violence and threats in case of unpaid rent. According to field workers in Brussels and in Wallonia, local authorities base their response to this issue on political calculations, preferring the eviction of families to the prosecution of slumlords.

It all comes down to the fact that, as mentioned earlier, it is difficult (if not impossible) for Roma to prosecute when faced with cases of individual discrimination, be it by the Police, the administration, the justice system, health care workers or school officials. Discriminatory behaviours are easier to unveil and to denounce when they happen on a broader, more systematic scale.

Such cases emerged amongst law enforcement authorities. A notable example is that in April 2015, it was revealed that the federal police in Flanders was making use of a "Gypsy" tag in their national internal data base. The "Gypsy" tag was ticking box available for stating criminal facts or describing the profile of suspected or convicted offender. It appeared that these tags were then stored for indefinite periods of time. The *Minderheden Forum* (Flanders) and the Centre for Equal Opportunities UNIA asked the Police to stop this practice for its clear link to ethnic profiling. The "Gypsy" tag was later changed into "Travellers" tag, on the grounds that the objective was to target itinerant criminals and not to act upon an ethnic basis.

## Right to free movement

Fundamentally, freedom of movement is a right subjected to conditions, notably that of having sufficient financial resources not to become an "unreasonable burden on Member States". Yet, it is precisely the lack of financial resources that drives many Roma families into exile. In Belgium, grassroots organisations working with Roma report that oftentimes, the notion of "unreasonable burden" is used excessively when it comes to Roma: in some cases, applying for non-contributory social assistance was enough to generate an order to leave the country.

The main obstacle is thus the condition of financial self-sustainability: the families who cannot meet this requirement not only face legal status instability, but also significant difficulties in accessing housing, schooling and social help. As it was recalled by the CIRE, the Foyer and the CMGVR, Roma families encounter difficulties to even meet the first criterion for obtaining a residence permit, which is to have an actual residence in Belgium, notably because landlords are reluctant to the accommodation of large families. They are in a deadlock as long as they do not own a residence permit, they cannot benefit from social support, and when they apply for social assistance, the Foreigners Office is likely to withdraw their residence permit. According to the CIRE, there is presently a latent fight against social immigration of EU citizens, in cause of which Roma also risk losing their residence permit when they obtain work through inclusion programs led by public social assistance centres or municipalities.

The other exception to freedom of movement for EU citizens is representing a threat to public order (security, health, tranquillity). However, in some countries, accusations of threat for public order can be done on the basis of suspicion alone (of a crime). In Belgium, it is the case since 9 February 2017, when the Parliament adopted two bills establishing that the existence of a criminal conviction is no longer required to justify an expulsion measure.

Overall, it is difficult to deny that for many Roma coming from European countries, exercising the right to freedom of movement comes close to an obstacle course, although it is one of the main prerogatives inherent to EU citizenship

Roma coming from countries outside of EU are not eligible for freedom of movement in the way EU citizens are. It must be said that whether they come from European countries or not, Roma's applications for asylum in Belgium are almost systematically denied because their country of origin is listed as "safe", although Europe officially recognizes Roma are Roma face discrimination and exclusion in many member states and accession countries. This adds up to the reasons why it is crucial to communicate about antigypsyism and to get the message through to national authorities that this form of racism leads to persecution so strong they fall within the scope of legitimate reasons for asylum seeking.

Concerning the right to freedom of movement for Travellers, there is an argument to be made that the lack of available sites for (temporary and permanent) stay, and the fact that many local authorities are still averse to hosting caravans on their territory, directly impacts Travellers' right to work, their right to live with their family, but also their freedom of movement. The case of Travellers with regards to freedom of movement in Belgium is all the more equivocal that a significant percentage of them are of Belgian origin.

## ADDRESSING ANTIGYPSYISM

### Institutional settings for fighting discrimination and addressing antigypsyism

#### ***Antigypsyism as a specific form of racism: recognition in process***

It should be noted that although the concept of antigypsyism now benefits from official recognition at the European level, it is not yet the case formally at the national level. As a result, there is no funds allocated, no structure established by the government to initiate and coordinate programmes to address antigypsyism as a specific form of racism.

As evoked previously, UNIA, the Belgian Equal Opportunity Body, is the main institution to fight discrimination and racism. Another central organisation in the fight against racism is the MRAX (Movement against Racism, Antisemitism and Xenophobia). However, despite several attempts, this organisation admittedly has a hard time reaching out to the Roma and Travellers communities.

According to the CIRE, it is clear to all stakeholders that antigypsyism exists and that this phenomenon is not new. The CMGVR and other grassroots organisations are aware that antigypsyism is at the core of the socio-economic exclusion faced by Roma. Over the past few years, the notion "antigypsyism" as a specific form of racism was at the centre of many discussions amongst the civil society. On this subject, it can be noted that UNIA makes use of the term "antigypsyism" as a specific form of racism in its 2016-2018 Strategy Plan.

When questioned about the fight against antigypsyism, some civil society stakeholders we interviewed noticed that evoking the subject of "ethnicity" around discussion tables in Belgium often generates suspicion and even rejection. According to them, these reactions are revealing of "ideological stereotypes" amongst institutions and civil society actors. For some, the reluctance to refer to "antigypsyism" as a specific type of racism is explained by a strategic point of view: racism is a process that applies identically to all minorities (black people, Roma, religious groups). Creating specific categories of racism is thus likely to weaken the efficiency of the fight against racism.

According to several Roma and Travellers mediators we interviewed, antigypsyism is a phenomenon which is very much talked about, but which is not actually fought against. According to these mediators, it is in the distribution of resources and in the access to rights that antigypsyism is most traceable.

#### ***Awareness raising amongst public services and local authorities***

On the occasion of the International Roma day (8 April), UNIA gave the floor to four Roma people, who spoke about their identity, but also their dreams, their inspiration and consolation. Those testimonies are now readable on the website of the Belgian Equal Opportunity Body.<sup>27</sup>

Recently (May 2017) the CIRE, *Brussels Laïque* and the General Delegate for Children's Rights organised a reflection and sensitisation meeting titled "Families in situation of permanent wandering: it is not my responsibility". Regional authorities and public organisations were present. The aim of this event was to invite field actors and the relevant bodies to share their analyses and experiences in order to spring out idea of structural solutions to improve the life conditions of these families.

Awareness-raising amongst public services and local authorities is mostly up to grassroots organisation and their sensitisation and training efforts.

The CMGVR regularly organises, in Wallonia and Brussels, conferences and trainings for mediators and public services (health care personnel, social workers, police,

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<sup>27</sup> The website of UNIA: <https://www.unia.be/fr>



administration) meant to raise awareness and sensitise frontline actors in how to go beyond stereotypes and cultural representations, as well as in the ways to support effective action. The CMGVR is involved in the organisation of meetings at the local level gathering Roma and Travellers organisations, municipalities, Provinces and regional authorities.

The Foyer and the CIRE organise trainings for public services on the situation of Roma in Brussels and on questions related to work, employment and professional training. Sensitisation/advocacy meetings are set up for municipalities, CPAS and regional authorities on the thematic of families in situation of permanent wandering in order to promote the setting up or the financing of actions allowing for breaking the vicious circle they are stuck in.

### Countering hate crime and hate speech against Roma, and antigypsyist rhetoric of politicians, public figures and media

According to the knowledge of the authors, there is no recent case of hate crime against Roma or Travellers that has been reported. However, some media and politicians keep using rather generalising and stigmatising discourses about Roma and Travellers.

#### *Hate speech in the media*

In Belgium, there are regulation and deontology bodies for the media, notably the Council of Journalistic Ethics (*Conseil de Déontologie Journalistique*) and the High Audio-visual Council (*Conseil supérieur de l'audiovisuel*).

Stigmatisation in the media mostly has to do with the fact that when it comes to Roma and Travellers, the media almost only covers situations that are problematic: begging, homelessness, delinquency, school dropouts. This process refers Roma and Travellers to categories linked to marginality and deviance: this is how stigmatisation in the media directly participates to discrimination in society.

Because of both the underreporting and the lack of media and political interest, the issues of hate crimes and hate speech against Roma and Travellers are under-documented. Still, recently, some press articles have pointed the finger to the presence of Roma in city neighbourhoods, linking it to a series of disturbances or cohabitation problems. However, it is difficult to include such articles in the category of hate speech since there is no explicit incitement to racial hatred.

One noticeable case of overt racism in the media occurred in 2016: a famous radio anchor made discriminatory statements towards Travellers. Those statements happened at prime-time hours, during the road-information segment, and disclosed very specific details: *"I would like to warn you about the presence of Gypsies in the region of (...). They are driving a grey van and a dark blue Mercedes with French matriculation plates. So, watch out, you never know, close your doors. If you have things that could be stolen at home, watch out."*<sup>28</sup> We notice that we do not know of whom he was speaking (Roma or Travellers). More probably, all Roma and Travellers communities as a whole whatever they are and wherever they come from. Interestingly enough, the first reactions came from the radio audience. The auditors published their concerns on social networks and alerted the public radio direction. Following several complaints, an internal decision suspended the anchor from his duty for a week.

Additionally, the High Audio-visual Council (CSA) took over the file and CSA condemned the direction of the channel for diffusing statements inciting to discrimination against Travellers for the second time. *"Indeed, the anchor was inviting his audience to take precautions against burglary because of the presence of Travellers in their region. Such statements are to be analysed as an incitation to adopt a differential – and thus*

<sup>28</sup> CSA. "Propos d'Alain Simons sur les « gitans » : le CSA sanctionne la RTBF pour avoir diffusé une incitation à la discrimination". Available at: [http://www.csa.be/system/documents\\_files/2709/original/RTBF%20d%C3%A9cision%20incitation%20%C3%A0%20la%20discrimination.pdf?1494355687](http://www.csa.be/system/documents_files/2709/original/RTBF%20d%C3%A9cision%20incitation%20%C3%A0%20la%20discrimination.pdf?1494355687)

*discriminatory – behaviour towards people on the basis of their alleged ethnic belonging. They are therefore illegal*". The Travellers' civil society also introduced a judicial complaint against the anchor through the National Travellers Committee. According to the CMGV, this event reveals the importance of the mobilisation and awareness-raising efforts set up by the civil society in Wallonia.<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, on the other end of the spectrum, the sensitisation efforts led by the civil society are also given some room in the media (TV, newspapers, radio), which has the potential of counteracting, to some extent, the mainstream antigypsyist rhetoric.

### **Hate speech online**

In 2016, UNIA opened 336 files concerning racist/discriminatory content in online medias (in general, not just about Roma and Travellers). The generalisation of shameless displays of hatred online reveals a clear need for more regulation, prevention and mediation online to tackle the growth of hate speech.

Fortunately, blatant racism from public figures is not too frequent because public spheres are subjected to a certain degree of scrutiny in Belgium. What is more of a matter for concern are the hateful contents and comments spilled by ordinary people on forums, social networks and online platforms. On a daily basis, hateful/racist comments are diffused against Roma and Travellers, based on incorrect information, prejudice, shortcuts, rumours, clichés.

Internet is a space of constant stream of hate speech against Roma and Travellers. Particularly because the comment sections on social medias and in the online discussion platforms are hardly ever subjected to moderation by the websites and page owners. Racist comments comparing the communities, calling for violence or regretting genocidal times are dolefully commonplace. When interviewed on this issue in the frame of the monitoring report, the Cell against Social Exclusion, a social service attached to the municipality of Molenbeek, and which has developed an expertise with the Roma population – suggested that a Roma supervision body should be created in order to initiate legal proceedings against hate speech online.

In fact, there is evidence that systematizing a reporting process could be effective: the CMGV was involved in the monitoring of hate speech online and noticed that each time hateful or racist comments were reported, they got removed by the website moderators.

### **Assisting victims of hate crimes and hate speech**

On this matter, we can only start from the observation previously noted that Roma do not report discrimination or hate speeches perpetrated against them. Adding the need for outreaching efforts from the Belgian equal opportunity and anti-racism bodies, it also means that the first necessary step is to investigate what are the conditions in which marginalised and poor people are actually enabled to press charges against discriminatory or violent behaviours. Indeed, collecting data, analysing it and reporting on hate crime can provide communities and Civil Society Organisations with a powerful tool with which to present their concerns to government, law enforcement, media and others. Nevertheless, to increase the effectiveness of research, a unique methodology should be used. European Roma Information Office (ERIO), created guidelines for monitoring of hate crime and hate motivated incident.<sup>30</sup>

At the moment, our society mostly knows Roma and Travellers through the media filter (TV, newspapers, social networks, internet). As a consequence, public opinion internalises this filter and the stigmatisation that comes along with it. A telling example: in 2014, in

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>30</sup> Facing Fact, "Guidelines for monitoring of hate crimes and hate motivated incident". Available at: <http://www.facingfacts.eu/publication/facing-facts-hate-crime-monitoring-guidelines>

Anderlecht, the local population and shopkeepers started a petition against the presence of Roma people on a square of the municipality.<sup>31</sup>

## Analysing and forming narratives and attitudes towards Roma

### *Awareness-raising efforts*

There are currently a few initiatives of awareness-raising for the general public meant to address antigypsyism and prejudices, some of which are supported by public bodies. These initiatives are mostly led by grassroots organisations:

Grassroots organisations and social services celebrate the International Roma day (8 March) and other symbolic events. For instance, in 2015, a special event was organised by the Foyer, the Cell Against Social Exclusion, Roma organisations and street stewards, with an exhibition, concerts, an introduction to the language, etc.

In Wallonia, the CMGVR organises every year the Travellers Day, in which Travellers, the local authorities, the civil society and experts meet to debate the best ways to address Travellers' way of life.

In the Flemish region, UNIA is participating in meetings with Roma representatives who are working on a project whose aim is to identify and dismantle stereotypes.

Municipalities also support cultural projects. For instance, Molenbeek (Brussels) supported the 2015 Balkan Traffic festival. A neighbourhood house hosted *Kesaj Tchavé*, a band of young Slovakian dancers and singers. More generally speaking, recently amongst the civil society, there has been several notable campaign efforts addressing prejudice and stereotypes against refugees and foreigners in general.

### *Changing the narrative about Roma and Travellers*

The main outline of a solution is to be found in dialogue and participation of all stakeholders and Roma leaders.

In other words, there is a need for a fair and real representation, giving a clear sense of "normality": Roma and Travellers are citizens like any other, who engage in professional activities and contribute to the wellness and wealth of society. It is important to encourage and support quality cultural and artistic projects/events on these themes because they have a real impact in terms of discovery and awareness.

As a good practice, Olivier Bonny from the Cell against Social Exclusion of Molenbeek, produced a series of short interviews of Roma called "*Parole aux Roms*" and "*Enfin libre*", showing different stories of successful integration. These videos can be watched on the website [www.MEDIATION4ROMA.be](http://www.MEDIATION4ROMA.be).<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Guy Bernard, « Les commerçants d'Anderlecht en ont ras-le-bol des Roms. » *DH*, (Septembre 2014). Available at : <http://www.dhnet.be/regions/bruxelles/les-commerçants-d-anderlecht-en-ont-ras-le-bol-des-roms-5406391235708a6d4d53051a>.

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.mediation4roma.be/index.php/ressources/reportages/84-parole-aux-roms>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Governance and overall policy framework

- To the three Regional governments – ministries for Social Action
  - Promote the socio-economic inclusion of Roma and Travelers by using intercultural mediation to overcome the language barrier and facilitate cooperation. These mediators should belong to Roma or Travellers community, have a good knowledge of public and civil society institutions and be fluent in their community language as well as national language (French, Flemish or German depending on the region).
  - Promote the official consultation of Travellers and Roma leaders in all policies where they are an explicit target category.

### Anti-discrimination

- To the Flemish and French Ministries for Equal Opportunities
- To UNIA, the Belgian Equal Opportunity Centre
- To civil society and grassroots organisations
  - Strengthen the accessibility of legal procedure mechanisms by increasing UNIA's proximity with Roma and Travelers and the reality on the ground.
  - Increase school mediation to facilitate communication and continue to organise school relays.
  - Increase the number of sites available for Travellers in order to reduce systematic forced evictions
  - Increase the awareness raising of national authorities as well as stakeholders involved in working with Roma or Travelers, such as schools, police, administrative and social workers, to combat discrimination and stereotypes rooted in society.

### Addressing antigypsyism

- To the Flemish and French Ministries for Equal Opportunities
- To UNIA, the Belgian Equal Opportunity Centre
  - Support the recognition of antigypsyism as a specific form of racism in order to establish targeted programs to combat this form of racism.
  - Study the conditions under which marginalized and poor people are effectively allowed to lodge complaints against discriminatory or violent behaviour against them.
  - Systematic monitoring, reporting and suppression of online hate speech and antigypsyism, for example to combat entrenched prejudices.

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