ROMA ACCESS TO ADEQUATE MINIMUM INCOME SCHEMES IN BULGARIA, THE CZECH REPUBLIC, HUNGARY, ROMANIA, AND SLOVAKIA

A contribution to reducing Roma poverty and social exclusion

This synthesis report was drafted by Amana Ferro, Senior Policy Adviser with the European Roma Grassroots Organisations (ERGO) Network, based on an extensive data collection exercise among the ERGO Network national membership, carried out between April and September 2021. Researchers in Bulgaria (Integro Association), the Czech Republic (Life Together), Hungary (Socfactor Consulting), Romania (Policy Center for Roma and Minorities) and Slovakia (Roma Advocacy and Research Centre) have provided direct evidence and national case studies.

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KEY MESSAGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

-R SYX SJ GSYRXVMIW QMRMQYQ MRGSQI FIRI

The amounts of minimum income schemes, as well as the reference indexes on which they are based, need to be increased in close conRIGXMSR XS TYVGLEWMRK TS[IV MR½EXMSR V national poverty line, so that they can fully deliver on their purpose of TVSZMHMRK HMKRM¼IH PMZIW

Governments favour a punitive approach over personalised, MRGPYWMZI WYTTSVX

There must be a conceptual shift towards putting in place supportive structures that help people through disadvantage, rather than the presumption of guilt that results in claimants being submitted to harsh GSRHMXMSREPMX] ERH WERGXMSRW MR I\GLERK imum income schemes should be rooted in a rights-based approach.

'SQTPI\ ETTPMGEXMSR TVSGIWWIW ERH VIUYMVIQ QER] 6SQE JVSQ ETTP]MRK

The methodology, associated bureaucracy, and corresponding costs QYWX FI WMQTPM¼IH ERH WMKRM¼GERXP] VIHY people experiencing dire poverty, such as many Roma, to both apply for as well as maintain their entitlements. Better access to information and support in Roma communities need to be resourced and implemented.

> “This money is very little for living. And a little too much to die for.”
>
> Roma woman, 55, **Hungary**

**4YFPMG)QTPS]QIRX 7IVZMGIW EVI MPP IUYMTTIH
[MXL 6SQE ETTPMGERXW**

Urgent MRZIWXQIRX MW RIIHIH JSV QSVI WXEJJ M as the necessary anti-bias training and skills for them to deal in a supportive way with claimants facing multiple and complex barriers. Hiring Roma mediators to bridge intercultural gaps also helps.

**Roma minimum income recipients are stigmatised
ERH JEGI ERXMK]TW]MWQ**

The GYPXYVI SJ FPEQMRK FIRI¼X GPEMQERXW EW poverty and as abusers of the welfare state must end and be replaced by an approach of solidarity and mutual support. Widespread antigypsyism must be combated in all aspects of daily life.

6SQE GSQQYRMXMIW ERH GMZMP WSGMIX] QYWX F

Both decision-makers drafting public policy, as well as the civil servants implementing it, must cooperate closely with Roma stakeholders to ensure evidence-based solutions that actually work and improve people's lives in a decisive way.

**EU action is needed: a Framework Directive, a European Year,
FIXXIV GSRXVSP SJ)9 JYRHW**

As Member States appear reluctant to make the necessary changes on their own, more impetus should be given from the European level, for example through a Framework Directive for Adequate Minimum Income or a new European Year against Poverty.

INTRODUCTION

Rationale

In a cash-based economy, providing people with adequate financial resources is a necessary pre-requisite for fighting poverty and social exclusion, as well as for enabling individuals to reach their full potential and to access rights and opportunities on the labour market and in society.

Access to adequate social protection when income from paid employment is unavailable is also a cornerstone of the European Social Model and our welfare states. The EU Council Recommendation of 24 June 1992 on Common criteria concerning sufficient resources and social assistance in social protection systems clearly urges Member States "to recognize the basic right of a person to sufficient resources and social assistance to live in a manner compatible with human dignity as part of a comprehensive and consistent drive to combat social exclusion." This commitment is reaffirmed in the EU Active Inclusion Recommendation (2008) and the European Pillar of Social Rights (2017), the compass for Europe's recovery.

Minimum income is a social protection benefit [illegible] a cash [illegible] is transferred by the State to individuals in order to protect them from poverty and social exclusion. It is called a "last-resort" safety net. It is:

- **Means-tested:** It is not automatically available to all (unlike the universal basic income). People must apply for it and pass a means test, which aims at demonstrating that their combined income from all sources is less than a pre-defined threshold.
- **Non-contributive:** Unlike unemployment benefits or pensions employees pay social security contributions during their working lives, minimum income schemes do not require prior contributions and through general taxation.
- **Conditional:** Most countries require minimum income recipients to engage with labour market activation programmes, to be available to take up work when offered, and/or to be willing to perform community services.

With Europe's Roma experiencing poverty rates of over 80% and employment rates of only 43%,

access to adequate social protection, including minimum income schemes, is fundamental in order XS KYEVERXII HMKRMûIH lives

and to enable the Roma to fully participate in the labour market and society.

With this report, we aim to provide data and strong evidence of Roma concerns, as well as good practices for improving access to and take-up of social protection and minimum income in selected Member States. The aim of this research is to inform better delivery of the EU Roma Strategic Framework on Equality, Inclusion and Participation, particularly the cross-cutting objective on reducing Roma poverty, as well as of the Action Plan for the European Pillar of Social Rights. It will equally feed into advocacy around the upcoming Council Recommendation on Minimum Income, foreseen for 2022, and around achieving an EU Framework Directive on Adequate Minimum Income.

Methodology

Between April and September 2021, ERGO Network researchers in Bulgaria (Integro Association), the Czech Republic (Life Together), Hungary (Socfactor), Romania (Policy Center for Roma and Minorities), and Slovakia (Roma Advocacy and Research Centre) have prepared in-depth national case studies about Roma access to minimum income and social protection in their country.

In **Bulgaria** WYVZI]W [IVI GSRHYGXIH PSGEXMSRWx 7LYQIR /EW /VMZSHSP &SXIZKVEH ERH ent parts of Bulgaria, including municipali- XMIW SJxHMJJIVIRX WM^I population. This was complemented by ExHIWO WXYH]xSR I\MWX ulations in Bulgaria, relevant to the topic, as well as by additional research and analysis of existing reports on Bulgaria's minimum income schemes and social assistance policies as a way to combat poverty, and semi-structured interviews [MXL 6SQExSJxHMJJIVIRX EKIW

Access Bulgaria's national case study on Roma access to adequate minimum income here.

In the **Czech Republic**, researchers drew on PSRK I\TIVMI social workers from the Child Protection Hnízdo Team of Life Together. Additional desk research and governmental data was also used. The report was submitted for comments to Public Employment Service S¾GMEPW FIJSVI ¼REPMWMRK

Access the Czech Republic's national case study on Roma access to adequate minimum income here.

In **Hungary**, a combination of desk and empirical research was used, predominantly based on the former. While there is some literature and data on the Hungarian minimum income, there are very few sources concerning Roma access. Relevant information on these aspects was obtained in close consultations with researchers, practitioners and, where possible, the Roma concerned.

Access Hungary's national case study on Roma access to adequate minimum income here.

In **Romania**, two main methods were used. Desk research included materials on the minimum income, studies on numbers and impact developed by Romanian researchers, data from the Labour Ministry, and data collected by NGOs. The second source of information (mostly about dif- ¼GYPXMIW MR XLI ¼IPH VIPEXIH XS EGGIWWMRK XLI QMRMQYQ MRGSQI FIRI¼X [IVI TIS- ple from the Ferentari neighbourhood of Bucharest. Ferentari is an urban ghetto; the information received applies to all types of poor communities. What matters here is less the geography and more the economic situation of the potential FIRI¼GMEVMIW

Access Romania's national case study on Roma access to adequate minimum income here.

In **Slovakia**, semi-structured interviews were used to obtain information from respondents, which were then anonymised and analysed collectively, retaining only the gender and age of the respondents. The respondents were three Romani men and three Romani women aged between 18 and 62. Geographically, the research was carried out in three marginalized Roma communities, one in the west of XLI GSYRXV] /STÃER] XLI SXL XVEP 7PSZEOME :IîO´ /VX§ E IEWXIVR 7PSZEOME ÂMVÃ 7M income is determined by law at a national level, respondents were chosen from different regions. The study is further supplemented by secondary data.

Access Slovakia's national case study on Roma access to adequate minimum income here.

The present report is a synthesis of the individual national case studies, and includes:

- **A brief snapshot of the socio-economic** WMXYEXMSR SJ XLI 6SQE PMZMRK MR XLI ¼ZI GSYRXVMIW
- **An overview of the national minimum** MRGSQI WGLIQIW EZEMPEFPI MR XLI ¼ZI GSYRXVMIW
- **A detailed look at the obstacles Roma face in accessing minimum income** WGLIQIW MR XLI ¼ZI GSYRXVM
- **Concrete recommendations for improv-** MRK EHIUYEG] ERH 6SQE XEC QMRMQYQ MRGSQI MR XLI ¼ZI

The report was drafted by Amana Ferro, Senior Policy Adviser with the ERGO Network S¾GI MR &VYWWIPW ERH IRHSVWIH F] XLI TEVXMGMTEXMR

Contributing national researchers

Galina Topalova MW ER I\TIVX E¾PMEXIH with the **Integro Association (Bulgaria)**, a member of ERGO Network since its inception. The association was established in October 2002. Its mission is to promote respect and equality for Roma. All activities are based on developing active citizenship in Roma communities and ensuring adequate representation of Roma people at all levels of decision making. The organisation has considerable experience in addressing anti-Roma attitudes, issues of social exclusion and human rights violations. The team of Integro works on creating conditions for dialogue and co-operation with local authorities and national institutions in Bulgaria. This includes empowerment of individuals and groups both for leadership and for grassroots mobilization. One of the focuses of the team is empowering Romani women and youth. Integro maintains and supports a sustainable and wide-spread network of local community activists all over the country, and it facilitates the cooperation of Roma activists with local authorities and NGOs. The association provides capacity building opportunities for all stakeholders.

1KV&G, IPIRE .IHMR›OSZ› (M :NEÃOSZ› 1KV 4EXVMO :NEÃ 1MGLEIPE +VIFIR§ÃOSZ› ERH Kumar Vishwanathan EVI E¾PMEXIH [M the organisation **:^›NIQR£ 7SY*MX§ • 0 Together (Czech Republic)**, a founding member of ERGO Network. The organisation was founded in 1997, after cataWXVSTLMG ½SSHW LEH E HMW impact on the Roma of Ostrava. Since then, Life Together has been working to build up the local Roma community, so that the Roma can come to enjoy the same rights and opportunities in the Czech society. In 1999, the organisation estabPMWLIH 3WXVEZE…W ¼VWX JVII %HZMGI 3¾GI [MXL E JYPP XMQ several teams of social workers to serve XLI TISTPI ERH MR½YIRGI TYF Dignity of all and respect for each other is a cornerstone of Life Together's work. The organisation carries out work in many areas (housing, education, health, human rights, employment), has been involved in ¼IPH VIWIEVGL ERH WXYHMIW successfully organised demonstrations against harmful laws that sought to put unconstitutional barriers on accessing LSYWMRK FIRI¼XW

Dr Katalin Nagy is a sociologist and EU TSPMG] I\TIVX E¾ PMEXIH [MXL **Socfactor Consulting (Hungary)**. Her expertise spans three decades of activity, focusing on labour research as well as working on European social policies for public administrations, including at Brussels-level. She has collaborated with a wide number of think tanks and civil society organisations. Over the past years, she has worked closely [MXL &YXXIV½] (IZIPSTQIRX E JSVQIV QIQ ber of ERGO Network, serving also as coordinator of a research programme about XLI IJJIGXW SJ PS[IVMRK WSGMEP FIRI¼XW 8LI association equally ran the very successful Pro-Ratatouille programme since 2012, a community-based organic agricultural social enterprise for disadvantaged Roma and non-Roma people. It aimed to spread sustainable developmental models among small village communities, while also help- MRK XS ¼KLX TVINYHMGIW XS[EVHW XLI 6SQE minority by enabling Roma and non-Roma members of the communities to work together towards a common goal.

Florin Botonogu is the President of the **Policy Center for Roma and Minorities (Romania)**, a foundation that has been working on Roma inclusion in one of the most deprived areas of Bucharest (Romania) for more than 10 years. PCRM is a founding member of ERGO Network. The main focus of its intervention is on educa- XMSR 8LI ½EKWLMT TVSKVEQ ‰%JXIV WGLSSP Education Club" provides remedial and alternative education for 100 children in the Ferentari ghetto. Additionally, the foundation supports the community in different ways and helps people experiencing poverty to access social services. The Center cooperates with electricity providers in order to help people to connect legally to the electricity grid, as well as provides support with small renovation projects. It equally mediates relations between ben- I¼GMEVMIW ERH TYFPMG EHQM itating administrative processes. Two of the newest issues addressed are health and domestic violence.

>Y^ERE ,EZ§VSZE is the President of the **Roma Advocacy and Research Centre (Slovakia)**, a civil society organisation established in 2014. The founders are young Roma of various professions, who have worked abroad and in Slovakia for many years, coming together to use their I\TIVXMWI XS MR½YIRGI XLI T course on the Roma minority. The organisation focuses on supporting Roma community development through an inclusive approach, based on active cooperation between minority and majority population. The most important activity of RARC is educating young people and improving the social status of disadvantaged groups. The Centre uses qualitative research methods in order to obtain relevant data as support for policy and public discourse change. The organisation is based in Skalica, where it has built outstanding partnerships with various local actors. Aside that, the Centre is also involved in national and international activities, including as a member of the ERGO Network.

SNAPSHOT OF THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION OF THE ROMA IN FIVE COUNTRIES

All five countries participating in this researc Roma residents in Europe In all five countries **Roma communities are (among) the hardest hit population groups** in what concerns poverty, unemployment, exclusion, antigypsyism, and very poor overall socio-economic indicators. This pre-existing state of dire inequality was significantly worsened by the impact of and associated measures, on the backdrop of increased antigypsyism. See also ERGO Network's research study on the impact of Covid-19 on Roma communities here.

In **Bulgaria**, the number of people who identified as Roma in was (4.4% of the population), while estimates by the European Commission point rather to 750 000 (10% of the population), and unofficial sources to numbers twice as high. The Fundamental Rights Agency found that, in 2017, 86% of the Roma were at risk of poverty and social exclusion, compared to 22% of the majority population. Only 38.8% of Roma are economically active, while only 14.4% receive a pension, as a result of a lifetime record of unemployment and precarious work with no employment rights or social security. The prevalence of younger age cohorts within the Roma population indicates shorter life expectancies, combined with higher birth rates. Most Roma live in segregated neighbourhoods, facing dire living conditions and daily antigypsyism. Most Roma children attend segregated schools, with poor attendance and completion rates. Most Roma are excluded from employment, income, rights, and services, on the backdrop of anti-Roma moods and anti-Roma discriminatory actions.

In the **Czech Republic**, approximately 262 000 people are Roma, in a population of approximately 10.65 million inhabitants (2019). More than half are so-called integrated Roma. The remaining part (approximately 110 000 people) can be considered socially excluded or at risk of social exclusion. Of these, approximately 73 800 people are also at risk of income poverty and material deprivation and live in households with low work intensity. Due to the unfavourable social situation, people do not have the opportunity to participate in everyday life and are isolated on the margins. Poverty and social exclusion of Roma are also significan discrimination and antigypsyism. Socially excluded localities in the country are characterised by spatial exclusion, low level of education difficult acces vices, to decent employment opportunities and to housing lack of fin poor hygiene and sanitation, addiction and substance misuse, and reduced socio-cultural competences.

In **Hungary**, the last census of 2011 counted 315 583 people identifying as Roma. However, there are estimated to be around 7-800 000 Roma living in Hungary, about 7-8% of the population. They are significantly younger have higher birth rates and a life expectancy 10 years lower than that of the majority. Roma populations are mostly concentrated in the North-East and in the South-West of the country. About half of them live in small villages, the other half live in urban slums in Budapest and other cities. The Roma are three times more exposed to poverty: in 2017, 75.6% of Roma were at risk of poverty and social exclusion, versus 25% of non-Roma. The Roma employment rate is significantly lower at 45%, compared to almost 70% for the general population. The unemployment rate of the Roma is 18.5%, more than four times the rate of the non-Roma population (3.8%.) The causes of their social and economic marginalisation are low educational attainment, typically low-paid employment, poor housing conditions and poor health, creating a vicious cycle of deprivation and exclusion. All of these are reinforced by antigypsyism, which is higher than the European average – but similar to other Eastern European countries - and through frequent institutional segregation.

In **Romania** the official number of Roma inhabitants according to the 2011 census was 621 573, while estimates about the actual numbers point to 1.5 to 2 million Roma. 80% of Roma live under the poverty line, as recognised by the Government in its National Recovery and Resilience Plan (2021). The same document points to abysmal living conditions, with 68% of Roma not having access to running, drinking water, while 79% lacked indoor plumbing and facilities such as a bathroom or a toilet. The draft National Roma Framework 2021-2027 of the Romanian Government notes that only 25% of young adults (over 16) are engaged in an income-generating activity, while the employment rate is only 34% of Roma men and 16% of Roma women. Equally, 63% of young Roma (16-24) are not involved in employment, education, or training (NEETs). 60% of Roma rural communities are clas
communities. Working abroad is the main source of income for 5% of Roma.

In **Slovakia**, according to a study by the Central European Institute for Labor Research (CELSI), most of the almost half a million Roma live in poverty and face social exclusion, at a rate of 87%, compared to 13% of the general population. Almost half (48%) of Roma over the age of 16 are unemployed according to sample surveys and only one in
employment or trade as their main economic activity. These communities are also located in less developed regions. More than 3/4 of Roma have only completed primary education, and only 24% of children aged 3-6 attend kindergarten. While in the general population the median equivalent disposable income for a one-member household is 7 462 euro per year, in marginalized Roma communities it is only 2 336 EUR per year. About 17% of people live on less than 3.8 EUR per day. 47% of households are in material need (compared to 4% of households within the general population), while two thirds of households have difficulty c
living costs. Hence, most Roma experience economic hardship and are denied access to equal opportunities for quality education, a healthy living environment, a decent job and a meaningful life.

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF MINIMUM INCOME SCHEMES IN FIVE COUNTRIES

0IKEP JVEQI[SVO

.R EPP ûZI GSYRXVMIW reviewed, a system of social assistance of last resort is in place. In all countries, this FIRIûX MW RSR GSR XVMFYXMZI ERH QIERW tested, signifying that it can be accessed only upon proving that combined income from other sources does not exceed E TVI HIXIVQMRIH threshold, along side several other conditions which are reviewed below.

In **Bulgaria**, the social assistance system MW PIKEPP] HI¼RIH F] XLI 7SGM Act and the Regulation for its implemenXEXMSR 8LIWI HI¼RI XLI IRXMX minimum of means to ensure the satisfacXMSR SJ ˆFEWMG RIIHW‰ HI¼R food, clothing, and housing according to the socio-economic development of the country. The regulatory framework is comprehensive and fragmented, going beyond the above stated Act and including other pieces of legislation (like the Integration of People with Disabilities Act, the Family Allowances for Children Act, Act on :IXIVERW SJ ;EVW IXG

In the **Czech Republic**, assistance in material need is regulated by Act No. 111/2006 Coll., The Act on Assistance in Material Need, as amended. The subsistence and existential minimum are regulated by Act No. 110/2006 Coll., The Subsistence and Existential Minimum Act. These minima are thresholds considered necessary to provide for basic necessities for those without any other source of income. The subsistence minimum is used for those who show a willingness to seek employment, while the existential minimum applies to any citizen of the country over 18 years of age who is unable to provide for themselves and does not engage in job seeking activities.

In **Hungary** XLI WS GEPPIH ˆFIRI¼X JSV TIV sons of active age” is regulated by Act III of 1993 on Social Administration and 7SGMEP &IRI¼XW ERH 6IKYPEXMSR on the detailed rules for claiming, estab- PMWLMRK ERH XLI TE]QIRX SJ WSGMEP FIRI¼XW in cash and in kind. It purports to ensure minimum standards of living for people of active age who are not employed, whose household members own no property, and who have a low monthly income. There EVI X[S X]TIW SJ GEWL FIRI¼XW SRI JSV people suffering from health problems or taking care of a child and therefore unable to work, and an employment substituting FIRI¼X JSV TISTPI [LS EVI EFPI XS [SVO

In **Romania**, the minimum income scheme has been introduced by Law no. 416/2001 ERH QSHM¼IH XMQIW PEWXP] MR 2018. Since 2016, a new law foresees the replacement of the minimum income scheme with the minimum income for inclusion, but this is yet to be implemented.

In **Slovakia**, minimum income is called “assistance in material need” and it is a right enshrined in Art. 39 (3) of the Constitution. The level of assistance in material need depends on the composition of the household and on meeting various conditions. The aim is to ensure a minimum income that can maintain basic living conditions for those unable to secure their income. It is based on a person’s income falling below amounts WTIGM¼IH MR XLI 0MZMRK 1M below), which were last established by the Measure of the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic No. 174/2020.

%HIUYEG] SJ XLI QMRMQYQ MRGSQI WGLIQIW

-R EPP FYX SRI '^IGL 6ITYFPMG SJ XLI ¼ZI GSYRXVMIW V **schemes are deemed** **EX MREHIUYEXI PIZIPW** compared to the actual cost of living, the national poverty lin XLI EFMPMX] SJ XLI FIRI¼X XS IJJIGXMZIP] XEOI VIGMTMIR RM¼IH PMZIW

Levels of minimum income schemes are set function of national reference amounts or indexes (with different names in each country), which are supposed to determine the minimum amount needed to cover basic needs. However, these **references are often MREHIUYEXIP] WIX VIWYPXMRK MR ZIV] PS[QSRXLP] EQSY** These indexes are mostly not calculated based on reference budgets and are also not adequately updated according to the real cost of living. As a consequence, the purchasing power of minimum income recipients is very low in many countries.

In **Bulgaria**, the legal reference for determining access to social assistance is the Guaranteed Minimum Income, required to cover basic needs. Its amount is 75 BGN in 2020 (approximately 38.4 EUR) per month per person. The Guaranteed Minimum Income is determined annually by the Council of Ministers, “according to XLI WXEXI…W ¼RERGMEP EFMPM ure that takes as key indicator sustainabil- MX] SJ TYFPMG ¼RERGIW VEXLI of the scheme. There is also little change over time: for 2017, it was the equivalent of 33 EUR, while for 2020-2021 it is 38.4 EUR per person per month.

The Differentiated Minimum Income is calculated by multiplying the Guaranteed 1MRMQYQ -RGSQI F] ER MRHMZMHYEP GSI¾GMIRX XEOMRK MRXS EGGSYRX EKI LIEPXL condition, household composition and social status. This differentiated scheme is used to determine who is entitled to tar- KIXIH SV QSRXLP] FIRI¼XW HITIRHMRK SR the income of the household. For example, people living alone aged over 75 or 65 are entitled to 165% or 145% of the guaranteed minimum income, respectively, while people living alone aged up to 65 receive only 73% of the guaranteed minimum income. Several other percentages are foreseen for a wide number of categories. It is thus apparent that most recipients are expected to live on an amount lower than 38.4 EUR a month.

%ROE MW E]IEV SPH 6SQE [SQER [LS [SVOW HE]W E Q VIGIMZI &+2 WSGMEP EPPS[ERGI VSYKLP])96 TIV 7LI GPIERW XLI WXVIIXW ERH TEVOW MR XS[R 8LMW WSGM ERGI MW JEV JVSQ FIMRK IRSYKL JSV WYFWMWXIRGI 8LI **family engages in informal work to make ends** QIIX 7LI XLMROW XLEX SRP] SPHIV TISTPI WXMPP **apply for minimum income, because most others feel it is not worth it for such a small** EQSYRX 7LI LIVWIPJ SRP] ETTPMIH MR SVHIV **to be eligible for the targeted heating allowance, as she needs to buy wood** HYVMRK XLI [MRXIV QSRXLW

:IPMRKVEH &YPKEVME

In the **Czech Republic**, the reference JSV GEPGYPEXMRK XLI FIRI¼XW EJJSVHIH to those in material need are based on the existential minimum of 2 490 '>/)96 TIV QSRXL JSV XLSWI inactive) or that of the subsistence QMRMQYQ SJ x '>/)96 TIV month (for those seeking employment). 8LI PEXXIV HIGVIEWIW XS '>/ EUR) for second and subsequent people in the same household, with differentiated additional amounts for dependent children of different ages. The living allowance is calculated as the difference between a person's (or household's) income and the applicable existential / subsistence minimum, respectively. An additional housing allowance and extraordinary immediate assistance are also available.

Overall, the system is relatively generous, TVSZMHMRK VSYKLP] ER E (5 EUR) per day per recipient. However, XLI EQSYRX SJ GSRXVMFYXMSRW ERH FIRI¼XW change frequently, as well as the relevant PIKMWPEXMSR [MXL WMKRM¼GERX GLERKIW SGGYV ring especially before elections. The level of the existential minimum is purposely very low, as it is designed to motivate people to actively seek employment. 35-60% of the living allowance for those in material need is paid in the form of vouchers, which can only be used for groceries in designated stores. Since most recipients SJ WSGMEP FIRI¼XW TE] VIRX SV YXMPMXMIW SYX of their subsistence allowance, they are forced to sell the vouchers illegally at a much lower price.

In **Hungary** XLI EQSYRX SJ XLI FIRI¼X JSV those unable to work depends on the size, composition, and income of the family. The maximum amount is 48 795 HUF, or 137 EUR (90% of the net minimum wage for public works) and the minimum 25 995 HUF, or 73 EUR per month in 2020. 8LI FIRI¼X JSV XLSWI EFPI XS [SVO MW ¼\IH equal to 80% of the minimum old-age pension, namely 22 800 HUF, or 64 EUR per QSRXL 8LI EQSYRX SJ XLI PEXXIV FIRI¼X has remained unchanged since 2012.

8LIVI LEW FIIR RS S¾GMEP GEPGYPEXMSR SJ the subsistence minimum since 2015, while most social provisions are tied to the arbitrarily set level of the statutory minimum for old-age pensions, which is unchanged since 2008. According to current research, in 2019 the average value of the subsistence minimum per consumption unit was 101 398 HUF (300 EUR) per month, while the value of the food basket for an active adult was 28 167 HUF (81 EUR) per month. The subsistence level of an average household consisting of two persons of active age and two children was calculated at monthly 294 055 HUF (840 EUR). It is clear that the amount of XLI QMRMQYQ MRGSQI MW WMKR than the minimum subsistence level. This is coupled with a loss of purchasing power HYI XS MR½EXMSR

In **Romania**, minimum income entitlements are calculated according to the Reference Social Index, which is only 500 RON (approximately 100 EUR). This is not based on a reference budget methodology or actual needs. The value of the minimum income amount is calculated function of the number of people in a household, by multiplying this index by a given coef¼GMIRX [LMGL MW MXWIPJ ZIV one person (142 RON), 0.510 for two people (255 RON), 0.714 for three people (357 RON), 0.884 for four people (442 RON), ERH JSV ¼ZI TISTPI 63 additional 0.073 is added for each additional person.

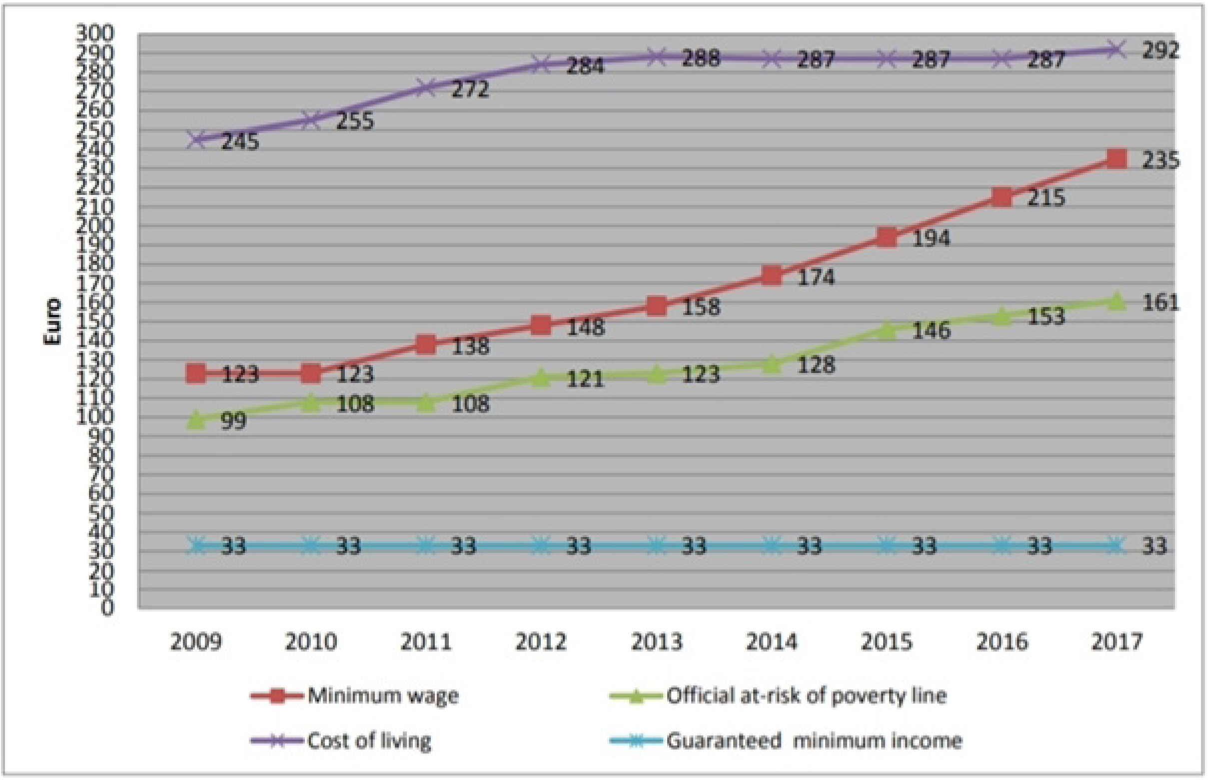
There was an attempt to gradually bring the Reference Social Index up to 1200 RON but, while the Parliament adopted the change MR MX [EW RSX VEXM¼IH F] The European Commission Country Report for Romania in 2020 emphasised the problem of a very low Reference Social Index in relation to poverty reduction. As the level of minimum income remained unchanged since 2008, and considering the evoluXMSR SJ TVMGIW ERH MR½EXM of goods and services one can purchase actually decreased. In September 2008, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation calculated a minimum monthly basket for a family of 2 adults and 2 children at the level of 6 762 RON, while for September 2020 it has been calculated at 7 278 RON. This is many times over the amount of 442 RON foreseen for such a family based on the Reference Social Index. For the minimum income to cover minimum expenses of a family, it should be increased by 16 times. According to the Law 225/2021, the Index will be adjusted every year (March), function of the inflation rate calculated for the previous year.

In **Slovakia**, the reference is the Living

In **Bulgaria**, in 2021, the national poverty line is 369 BGN (or 188 EUR) monthly per household member – a far cry from the 38.4 EUR of the Guaranteed Minimum. The minimum wage and the official poverty line are still far from the real cost of living and the purchasing abilities for subsistence, as the graph below indicates. The approved Guaranteed Minimum Income is even lower if we consider real needs.

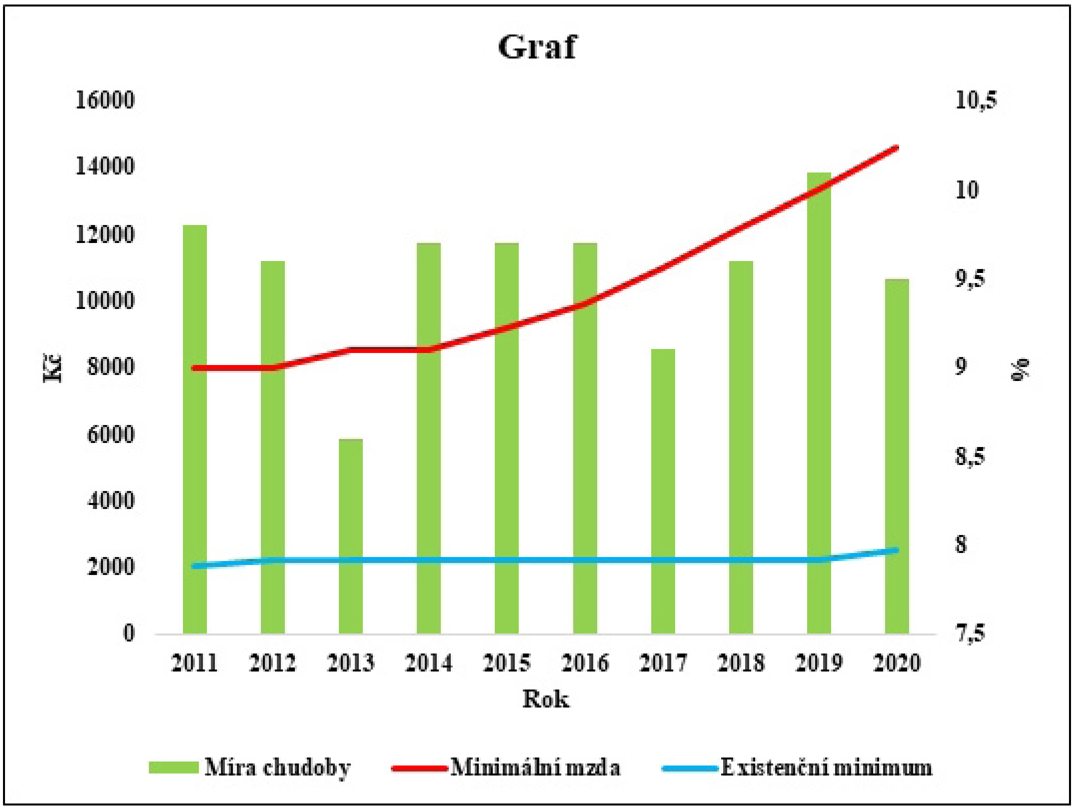
The National Statistical Institute reports 1 659 900 people, or 23.8% of the Bulgarian population, as living below the poverty line. 68.4% of the Roma in Bulgaria experience poverty. Bulgaria's minimum income schemes have little to do with adequate minimum income, defined as income which is necessary for people to live with dignity and participate fully in society.

BULGARIA - Trends in monthly cost of living, minimum wage, official at-risk of poverty line and 'guaranteed minimum income' in euro (2009-2017)



Source: European Minimum Income Network, Context Report Bulgaria, 2017.

In the **Czech Republic**, minimum income shows a rising trend, as illustrated by the graph below, which correlates it to the Czech national poverty line, as well as the existential minimum. However, the difference between official minimum income and poverty levels shows important fluctuations. High indebtedness of Czech households aggravates household poverty. According to the Czech Executor's Chamber, 783 053 people faced a total of 4 476 009 executions in 2019. The Government has taken some measures to alleviate the situation. Still, the level of poverty in the Czech Republic is expected to increase in 2021, as the pandemic and rising energy prices are endangering households, with many at risk of falling into energy poverty. At least 65% of families living in Socially Excluded Localities are under the poverty line, compared to 9.7% national average.



Legend: Green – Poverty line; Red – Minimum Income; Blue– Existential minimum.

Source: Czech Statistical Office

In **Hungary**, the poverty threshold of 2019 indicated that 1.7 million people (or 17.7% of the population) were at risk of poverty and social exclusion. The Hungarian poverty line was 105 370 HUF (or 324 EUR) for a single-person household, and 221 275 HUF (or 680 EUR) for a 2-person household with 2 children. It is evident that even the maximum amount of minimum income for those unable to work (48 795 HUF or 137 EUR) is significantly lower than the poverty line.

In **Romania**, in 2018 the poverty line was 750 RON (150 EUR) a month for a single adult and 1 575 RON a month for a family of two adults and two children under 14. This is significantly higher than the 142 RON a single adult receives per month from the minimum income benefit. As a self-evident conclusion, a family of four cannot live on less than 500 RON (100 EUR) per month in any circumstances. The impact of social transfers on the rate of relative poverty is, accordingly, very low. In 2018, relative poverty before all social transfers was 28%, and after it was 23.5%. The minimum income benefit helped only 1.7% of beneficiaries out of poverty in

2016. Had the Reference Social Index been raised according to inflation, the poverty rate in Romania would have been lowered by 12%. Had the Index been raised more generously (similar to the average salary), there would have been a 44% decrease of the poverty rate. However, the level of minimum income in Romania is not meant to get people out of poverty.

In **Slovakia**, the poverty line is 373 EUR for a single person, which is much higher than the minimum income entitlement of 68.8 EUR per month, while the 780 EUR poverty line for a couple with one child under age 14 is also many times higher than the minimum income entitlement of 176.40 EUR per month.

Eligibility, conditionality, sanctions

In the five countries reviewed, several **eligibility criteria need to be fulfilled** in order for a person to be able to access minimum income benefits.

> These seem designed to decrease the number of claimants as much as possible and to discourage applicants, rather than stemming from an inclusive approach meant to support and empower people from a rights-based perspective.

Additional conditionality is in place in all five countries for recipients, **including compulsory community work, which does not respect the principle of equal pay for equal work**, and compliance with rigid checks by Public Employment Services. Additionally, most minimum income schemes in the five countries **cannot be combined with income from paid work**.

One important dimension is **means-testing**, namely establishing the income that a person has access to, to determine whether they qualify for additional assistance from the state. This involves a comprehensive set of criteria, looking at cash income, assets, housing conditions, household composition, and other elements. These criteria are very similar across the five countries, as described below. However, the theoretical income from some of these possessions does not translate into actual cash in people's pockets. Moreover, housing and household conditions are often unnecessarily strict, as well as unrealistic.

> The procedure feels like a punitive paper exercise, bearing little connection to people's actual lives and needs.

In **Bulgaria**, stringent eligibility is applied based on one's housing situation, with, for example, a single person having to live in a dwelling no larger than one room to qualify (an additional room is allowed per person). Other exclusionary grounds are holding any movable or immovable property that could be a source of income, being registered as sole trader or owning capital in a commercial company or having more than 500 BGN (255 EUR) per person in savings.

In the **Czech Republic**, the "benefit procedure", assessing a person's eligibility, entails an investigation that lasts roughly 30 days, but can even go up to 60 days. The Public Employment Service organises visits to the applicant's residence, conducts personal interviews and requires proof of income and of accommodation. It is crucial whether the applicant is deemed as actively looking for a job – in which case they are entitled to a higher amount – or not, and this decision is often very discretionary and subjective. The procedure of assessing claimants jointly at household level means that any additional income by a household member, from whatever source, may skew eligibility and entail curtailing or loss of benefits.

In **Hungary**, the claimant must be unemployed and have a monthly combined income of less than 90% of the minimum old-age pension (which is 25 650 HUF or 72 EUR). The entitlement is determined on a household basis, and it can only be claimed by one person per household. An applicant must have used up all their entitlement to unemployment benefits. Household members cannot own property, a family member cannot have a job paying minimum wage, and a claimant can be excluded for purchases such as of a second-hand car. A person is not eligible while receiving childcare allowance, child raising support, or benefits for persons with reduced working capacity, but minimum income can be combined with other types of benefits, e.g. family allowance, public health care card system, and local benefit.

In **Romania**, private property (dwellings aside main residence, terrain around one's house exceeding 1 km^2 in urban areas and 2 km^2 in rural areas) excludes people from entitlements. Additionally, many other categories do not have the right to claim the benefit, such as people owning a car or a motorcycle newer than 10 years, agricultural vehicles or wood-processing tools, or fields and animals that can produce more than 2 500 RON per family. Additionally, people with more than 3 000 RON (600 EUR) in their bank account equally do not qualify.

In **Slovakia**, all income and benefits of all household members are taken into account (excluding a percentage of earnings and pensions, and some other forms of social assistance), as well as property (aside one's home) and movable assets (aside one's means of transportation). Incidental earnings, such as proceeds from the sale of household items, must also be reported. The social security entitlements of other household members equally factor in the calculations.

In all five countries, minimum income recipients provide work in favour of the community in exchange for benefits.

In Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia, this is a compulsory pre-requisite for receiving minimum income. In the Czech Republic, this is an option claimants have in order to increase the monthly amount they receive. In Hungary, the public works scheme runs in parallel to minimum income. This contradicts a rights-based approach, as people are forced to provide work in exchange for a last-resort entitlement that should be unconditional, while

the work itself is remunerated at rates far below the national minimum wage.

In **Bulgaria**, unemployed persons of working age who receive minimum income under the terms and conditions of Art. 9 of the Regulations for implementation of the Law on Social Assistance are obliged to provide community work (cleaning streets, parks, etc) for 14 days a month / 4 hours a day.

In the **Czech Republic**, minimum income recipients whose benefit is calculated based on the subsistence minimum (for active jobseekers) have the option to engage in so-called Public Service. Working 20 hours a month in such a scheme increases the amount of entitlement to the full reference point of the subsistence minimum. Working 30 hours a month for Public Service adds 605 CZK (23 EUR) to the original amount. This means that, in the best-case scenario (full subsistence minimum 3 860 CZK + 605 CZK), the total entitlement is 4 465 CZK (174 EUR), much below the national minimum wage, set at 15 200 CZK (597 EUR) as of 1 January 2021.

In **Hungary**, the Public Works Scheme is well known. People of active age who are able to work (and hence receive the employment substitution benefit) must accept to provide work under this scheme to avoid losing the benefit. If such jobs are full time and do not require secondary education, net wage in 2020 was 54 217 HUF (152 EUR) per month. This is roughly 50% of the official minimum wage, but about 2.4 times higher than what they would receive otherwise. The total number of public workers in 2020 was around 90 000 persons monthly, a sharp decline compared to roughly 200 000 in previous years.

In **Romania**, minimum income recipients must engage with community service activities every month in exchange for the cash payments. The working needs of the community are decided by the mayor, who is in charge of elaborating plans for seasonal works and make them public. A mayor can lose tenure if they fail to do so.

In **Slovakia**, each recipient of legal age must work at least 32 hours per month in order to receive minimum income. This is based on the assumption that otherwise claimants are disconnected from the labour market and discouraged from seeking work. Refusal to comply with this condition leads to a reduction in the amount of the benefit, up to full withdrawal.

In some countries, **minimum income claimants must, as a pre-condition, register as unemployed** before being able to apply. This entails an additional set of conditionalities relating to being a job seeker, such as, for example, having to comply with frequent and burdensome checks by Public Employment Services located far away, or facing the loss of benefits if an offer of employment or training is refused for any reason.

In **Bulgaria**, only people who have been registered as unemployed for at least 6 months with the Public Employment Service are eligible to apply for minimum income. This means they need to physically visit the Public Employment Service office every month and sign documents, many incurring significant travel and other costs in order to comply. Missing a signature on account of not being able to travel means cancellation of the social assistance allowance for a year, as a form of punishment.

In the **Czech Republic**, all benefits are paid by the Public Employment Service, and claimants must attend regular meetings (first weekly, then monthly) and supply many documents, being faced with loss of benefits for several months (3-6) in case of non-compliance. The attitude of public servants is not supportive and understanding of objective circumstances, but rather punitive and unhelpful. Additionally, while many recipients engage with professional training, any resulting income (such as from an internship) has an impact on their eligibility and the amount of benefits received.

> **A Roma woman could not attend a scheduled appointment with the Public Employment Service in time because of train delays outside of her control. The explanation was not accepted, and the claimant was deprived of benefits for a duration of 6 months for having missed an appointment.**
>
> Ostrava, Czech Republic

In **Hungary**, those who are able to work and wish to receive the employment substitution benefit must register with the Public Employment Service and submit to certain conditions, including frequent checks. The entitlement to the minimum income benefit is terminated if a person is deleted from the registry as a jobseeker due to personal fault, refusal of a job offered or of the public works scheme, or failure to prove that they engaged in employment, training, or other activation programmes for at least 30 days in the previous year. Working informally in the grey economy attracts a one-month suspension of the benefit the first time, and its entire removal the second time.

In **Romania**, since 2018, refusing three job offers proposed by the Public Employment Service, or refusal to participate in professional training, for any reason, leads to the loss of the minimum income benefit.

In **Slovakia**, an amendment to the Act of Assistance in Material Need was approved, expanding the concept of “merit” even for the most basic amount of assistance. While it is not necessary to register formally as a job seeker to access minimum income, in practice this amendment means that refusing a job offer entails the complete loss of the benefit. There are exceptions to this rule, for categories such as people with dependent children, people with disabilities, pensioners, and people attending training instead.

In most of the five countries, minimum income cannot be combined with revenue from paid work or other sources. In fact, income from employment or other activities may act as exclusionary grounds for accessing the benefit. Given the very low amounts of minimum income schemes, such provisions effectively condemn recipients to a life of state-sanctioned poverty.

In Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Romania, having an income-generating activity while claiming minimum income is not possible. Claimants must be explicitly unemployed (and registered as such) in Bulgaria and Hungary, which is very difficult as the amount of minimum income is very low to live on. In **Bulgaria**, people are allowed to have other sources of income, however the cumulative amount is deducted from the benefit they receive. But the benefit is very low, not enough to live on, and many families end up excluded from receiving it for engaging in small income-generating activities to make ends meet. Similarly, in the **Czech Republic**, any increase in household income is an automatic reason to reduce benefits – even if only 70% of such an increase is taken into account, it still significantly affects the amount received. In **Hungary**, only simplified employment in seasonal, occasional, or domestic work is allowed. In **Romania**, applications are conditioned on official proof of no income, while even symbolic employment such as activities of a couple of hours a day that provide a small income are incompatible with receiving the benefit.

A Roma teenager received an award at school, which entailed a cash prize. Although this remuneration was small and one-off, it was included in the income of the whole family. On this basis, the family's housing and subsistence benefits were reduced. As a result of this situation, the family ran into financial difficulties for three months before their situation could be reassessed.

Ostrava, Czech Republic

In **Slovakia**, conversely, income from all sources is taken into account, and a person may still receive assistance for material need if the total falls short of the reference threshold.

Generic image

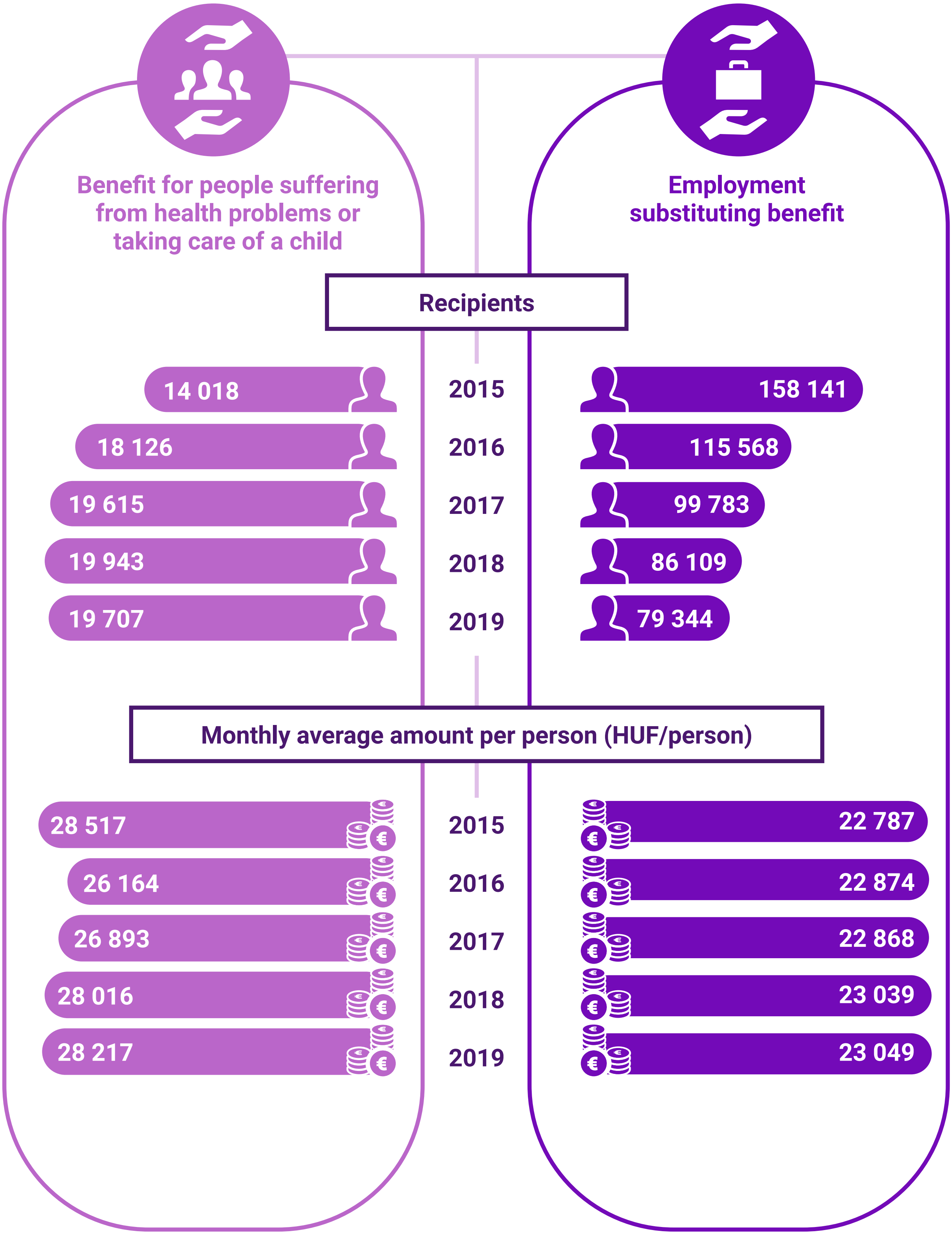
Take-up and number of beneficiaries

There is a common misconception in all five countries that social protection in general, and minimum income specifically, represent a disproportional burden on public finances, fuelling a rhetoric that stigmatises benefit claimants. In reality, however, most **countries spend only a small share of public budgets on minimum income schemes**, catering to a much smaller number of beneficiaries than claimed in the public discourse. Conversely, as most of the five countries have relatively significant shares of the population living in poverty, the **low number of claimants should be a cause for concern,** as it points to **low take-up and an overall inaccessibility of these schemes** for those who most need them.

In **Bulgaria**, even though the country registers the highest share of people experiencing poverty in the European Union, only a very small number of people receive social assistance. In fact, this is the very explanation for the high poverty rates, according to research carried out by the Open Society Institute in 2013. The actual number of recipients fluctuates from month to month, as some people lose entitlements while others become eligible, but the share does not exceed 3% of the country's population. One explanation for the low number of recipients is that many people emigrated from rural areas to other countries, or towns and villages in Bulgaria, leaving behind only the elderly and the extremely poor. Another is that the process is so complicated (and even humiliating) and the reward so limited, that most people prefer to find alternative solutions, including informal work.

In the **Czech Republic**, data from the Czech Statistical Office shows that the living allowance was paid to 71 700 applicants in 2007, and only 63 300 applicants in 2019. The housing supplement was paid to 25 200 applicants in 2007, and 22 900 applicants in 2019. These numbers are extremely low, and the number of socially excluded localities is still growing, as are the shares of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion, while the inequality gap between rich and poor widens.

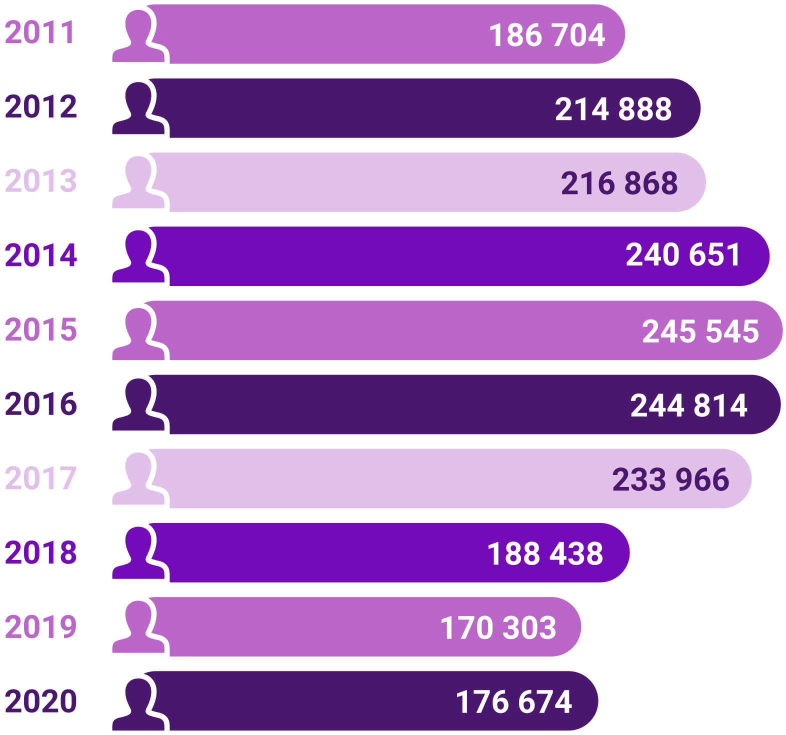
In **Hungary**, the number of minimum income recipients is very low, standing at roughly 100 000 a year (or 200 000 including those employed in the public works scheme), and decreasing (see table below). This is incongruent with the number of people in need as calculated in 2019 in relation to the subsistence minimum (2 million people), and to the official poverty line (1.7 million people). This low number can in part be explained by higher participation in the labour market and notable emigration, but also by increases in minimum wages in recent years, which excluded entire families from means-testing. Non-take-up is extremely high at around 50%, while the levels are highly inadequate. These are not concerns for the authorities, nor are they the object of public discourse or research. Subsequently, the impact on public finances is negligible, and Hungary fares very poorly in the EU in terms of social expenditure, dedicating only 0.01% of GDP to it, while the same rate is 1.25 % in the Netherlands, for instance.



Source: Hungarian Central Statistical Office

In **Romania**, in May 2021, only 165 666 people received minimum income benefits, while almost 14 000 benefits were suspended. The total amount paid was 43 306 454 RON, while the average amount received was 261.41 RON (a bit more than 50 Euro). The numbers do not show any significant progression over the past ten years, instead a decrease can be observed (see table below). The numbers show that only a very small percentage of people (in a population of roughly 19 million people) receive minimum income benefits, and only a tiny portion of the budget is allocated to it. The narrative that Romania spends a lot of money on social welfare is misleading, as such statements usually refer in bulk to contributive and non-contributive benefits alike, including universal benefits such as the child allowance. In fact, compared to other EU countries, Romania has one of the lowest levels of social expenditure as percentage of GDP.

Average number of beneficiaries



Source: Romanian Government, Ministry of Labour and Social Protection

In **Slovakia**, statistics from April 2021 by the Center for Labor, Social Affairs and the Family show that only 120 762 people received benefits in material need. Most recipients of benefits in material need were from districts registering some of the highest unemployment rates, and some of them are among the least developed. Public discourse, however, centres on meritocracy, despite assistance for basic needs being enshrined in the Constitution. There is no understanding that such schemes should compensate systemic failures such as poor service provision and lack of labour market opportunities, nor is there an approach of social solidarity and ensuring equality.

ROMA ACCESS TO AND TAKE-UP OF MINIMUM INCOME BENEFITS IN FIVE COUNTRIES

As highlighted in the previous section, **minimum income schemes in the five countries are far from perfect**, featuring amounts that are inadequate for combatting poverty and social exclusion, as well as application and implementation procedures that are punitive, restrictive, and exclusionary. In this context, our research aimed at determining **to what extent the Roma living in these countries are able to access these benefits.**

> Roma people experience much higher rates of poverty and social exclusion than the majority population in the reviewed countries, hence access to this benefit is crucial for improving their living conditions and opportunities.

Moreover, they face complex barriers stemming from **widespread antigypsyism and discrimination**, as well as from their overall status as disadvantaged groups, which hinder their access to the much-needed minimum income schemes.

Access to information and ease of application procedure

A first obstacle faced by potential Roma recipients would be the **lack of knowledge about the legal entitlement to minimum income**. Encouragingly, this does not seem to be the case, or at least not to a significant extent, in the five countries reviewed. The situation is, however, different when it comes to support with **the corresponding bureaucratic procedures necessary for the application**. It seems that, in most situations described in the five countries, **the system itself is not accessible, open, and supportive,** but intermediary structures – be it formal, such as social workers, or informal, such as friends or family – step in to assist potential claimants in navigating the requirements and administrative processes.

In **Bulgaria**, social workers provide the necessary information, alongside Roma mediators. In some places, these workers visit communities once a month, supporting people in compiling the necessary documents and informing them about deadlines and procedures. Some organise Open Days for information. It is not felt, however, that comprehensive systems are put in place at a central level to inform people about their rights and the procedures necessary to apply for them, and this burden falls onto civil society, who is unable to cover all national needs.

With the support of the ROMACT program, the municipality opened a community centre near the Roma neighbourhood, with a community mediator who provided information about existing social services and rights, as well as support with documents and applications. The region is very poor, with few employment opportunities. Many families were helped in this way to access their rights. Krasimira, a 55-year-old Roma woman, was supported through health checks and formalities to receive heating and travel allowances. Families living in extreme poverty and even homelessness were also helped by the centre.

Botevgrad, Bulgaria

In the **Czech Republic**, experience shows that the Roma generally do have the necessary information about existing benefits, despite the system being described as fragmented, confusing, and cluttered, with multiple sets of conditions to fulfil. However, the application process is not straightforward. Forms are often incomprehensible for Roma with lower education levels and are very difficult to fill in. Public Employment Services are neither equipped, nor willing to deal with the specific difficulties of such Roma applicants. A number of supporting documents are also needed (lease agreement, proof of income), which are not easy to obtain for many Roma, and also entail costs. Non-governmental organisations are instrumental in providing the necessary information and support with the application. More Roma assistants within Public Employment Services are needed, as well as the provision of non-bias training to non-Roma staff, so that they are in a better position to deal with the specificities of Roma applicants, breaking cultural differences and communication barriers so they can establish constructive cooperation.

In **Hungary**, information about minimum income entitlements is accessible in Roma communities, but mostly from word-to-mouth and extended networks of friends and family, rather than through official, targeted communication. Support can be provided by municipalities, families, or local charities such as the Order of Malta, but this is not the rule. Additionally, Public Employment Offices are located far away from Roma communities, with poor and sometimes expensive transport links from the claimants' place of residence. Regarding the complexity of the procedures, the social protection system is deemed as complicated, confusing, fragmented, bureaucratic, and the opposite of customer friendly. The approach is one of workfare, not welfare.

In **Romania**, the research shows that most Roma residents are aware of the existence of minimum income schemes. However, the most important problem is that a lot of documents are needed in a complex process. People who do not know how to read or write need additional assistance. Aside this, a strong deterrent is the cost itself of obtaining the needed documents, including transport to different offices located far from the applicant's residence.

In **Slovakia**, field social workers and community workers provide people with the necessary information about their rights. These are essential in minimizing misunderstandings at first contact with the social security offices, as they provide detailed information in an accessible way for residents of marginalized Roma communities. However, in practice, it is rather the informal network of friends and family that functions best to propagate information about the scheme, procedure, and entitlements.

> **I remember that when I first became unemployed and went to the office, I received very little information. The clerk didn't talk to me for a long time, she just gave me the forms and told me to write it all down. I went home and worried about it alone at home. Then I went back and told her that I didn't list some of the things because I didn't know. So she helped me with that, but I didn't feel she was willing.**
>
> Roma woman, 45, Slovakia

There are specific obstacles faced by potential Roma applicants for minimum income schemes, deriving from a life spent in poverty and antigypsyism, which has curtailed their access to basic skills and amenities and in turn act as deterrent to claiming social assistance.

These include, for example, **Roma who do not have an ID card, a fixed address or a bank account, or who are unable to read or write or are victims of the digital divide**. In the five countries, some steps have been taken to mitigate some of these barriers, while others remain unaddressed.

In **Bulgaria**, few social workers engage with those who don't know how to read or write or with the elderly to support them with paperwork. This type of support is normally provided by relatives, or Roma health or education mediators. Civil society organisations offer help wherever possible, but it is impossible for them to cover the entire territory. Investing in dedicated social services staff able to support these potential applicants with their specific needs would be very welcome as a governmental initiative. Additionally, having an ID card and a bank account is a must in order to apply for and receive minimum income; those who do not have one or the other are excluded a priori from the system.

In the **Czech Republic**, applications can be submitted both in person (at the Public Employment Service) or online. A valid ID card is mandatory, which is linked to a fixed address. Families that suffer evictions or internal displacement have to obtain new ID cards at every new address, which comes with additional costs and procedures, as well as delays while processing benefits. In the absence of a fixed address, some families choose to register at the Municipal Office, an option used by many Roma who have lost their homes. The benefits can be paid either by postal order or by bank account.

A Roma man lost his identity documents, but obtaining new ones meant paying fees he could not afford. He thus applied for extraordinary immediate assistance, but that took 30 days to come through. During the waiting period, he was unable to collect social benefits by post, as Česká Pošta did not recognize his temporary identity card. As he did not have a bank account, he was left effectively without any income for the month.

Ostrava, Czech Republic

In **Hungary**, while there are no nationality requirements, minimum income is conditional on legal residence. All claimants must hold an ID card reflecting the official address. In some cases, a street address is sufficient. A bank account is not mandatory, and most cash benefits are sent by post. This is a preferred solution also because it eliminates transfer fees. Illiteracy is increasingly rare, and it is addressed by a procedure where the Public Employment Service staff reads the documents out loud and accepts Xs as signatures. Since 2013, it is possible to apply and to manage one's profile online, but this is not mandatory.

In **Romania**, the research did not identify specific procedures put in place to deal with this kind of specific barriers and to ensure that tailored provisions make it possible for everybody to access minimum income, as a matter of rights. Having a valid ID card is indispensable for applying, and the card itself is linked to an official address in the municipality where the application for benefits is submitted. A very significant obstacle affecting the Roma is the fact that one cannot receive this benefit without a legal residence, which squarely excludes informal, unrecognised, and segregated Roma settlements.

In **Slovakia**, benefits can be paid by postal order, so not having a bank account is not a deterrent. Illiteracy is a very limited phenomenon, but when it occurs, it is up to community workers or family members to provide support in the absence of any official alternative procedures. People who cannot access online procedures have a harder time, having to go in person. Having an ID card is an essential pre-requisite for accessing benefits, though it can be obtained without a specific address. While the basic social benefit is not linked to a permanent residence, problems arise for Roma living in segregated areas: they often live in dwellings for which they cannot prove ownership, and hence are excluded from the complementary housing allowance. This is unacceptable, especially as most Roma end up living in unrecognised settlements through no fault of their own, but are pushed there.

> **“I did not even ask if we would be entitled to a housing allowance, because I know that others who live in our locality and are recipients of minimum income are not entitled to this allowance. You know, it’s not fair, because they (= legislators) know how the Roma got into illegal housing and didn’t do anything about it. They could at least change this and we would be able to pay for electricity, water and waste.”**
>
> Roma man, 59, Slovakia

Compliance with conditionality and eligibility criteria

In addition to the often complicated procedures associated with applying for minimum income benefits, the **schemes entail rather rigid eligibility criteria, strict conditionality** throughout the period that benefits are received for, as well as corresponding harsh sanctions for non-compliance. These parameters have a negative impact on take-up even when considering the majority population; **Roma beneficiaries have an even harder time complying** with these requirements. This is **inconsistent with a rights-based approach** to providing people with sufficient resources to lead dignified lives.

In **Bulgaria**, too many conditions and requirements discourage Roma from applying for minimum income altogether. One condition is that children are not allowed to miss more than 5 classes without a medical reason, but many families struggle with school attendance due to poverty and deprivation (lack of appropriate clothes, shoes, school materials etc). Once a month, claimants need to physically visit the Public Employment Services office located in municipal centres to sign a ledger, but Roma living in smaller villages and remote communities can't afford the trips. Many Roma people say that the community work requirements are unacceptable and unfeasible, and the benefit level is extremely low for the amount of work required. The punitive character of the social assistance schemes takes many Roma out of the system, as failure to comply with these requirements entails the suspension of the benefit. Due to the restrictive and hard to implement conditions for social assistance, many poor people are left with no social support, and even for those receiving support the monthly amount is extremely low and does not correspond to the real basic needs.

Galya is a 40-year-old Roma woman, whose husband had his benefits curtailed because he could not afford the 10 BGN trip to the nearest Labour Office for the regular visits. She herself receives minimum income in the amount of 200 BGN. Even combined with the 146 BGN per month they receive in child allowance, it is impossible to make ends meet. They raise animals and have a vegetable garden to feed their family, as the money is used for utilities and school needs.

Galatin, Bulgaria

In the **Czech Republic**, a claimant must very frequently report changes in their information (new lease, amendments to utilities bills etc) and provide the supporting documentation, or face loss of benefits. This is very difficult to comply with for many Roma, as some landlords tend to only sign monthly rental agreements with Roma residents – a highly discriminatory practice. A precarious living situation also leads to correspondence not being received, or important documents being lost over time. Adherence to deadlines, fulfilment of obligations regarding updates on all life changes and life situations in connection with social benefits is generally a problem for many poor Roma. The 30-60 days assessment period for the housing allowance also means people are left without any income in the meantime, during which time they accrue debts or face eviction. Additionally, many Roma are forced to engage in exploitative forms of illegal employment, as any official income entails a reduction in benefits, or is garnished to pay for debts and arrears.

In **Hungary**, claimants are not allowed to combine work with minimum income, while engagement with informal work in the grey economy attracts the suspension or complete elimination of the benefit. This is a very difficult condition to comply with for people experiencing poverty such as most Roma, as urgent needs require urgent financial solutions, and the benefit is too low to cover them. Equally, it takes up to 60 days for an application to be processed, during which no income is received. Cuts in public spending have led to an understaffing of Public Employment Offices, who are often overwhelmed and less inclined to be cooperative with the needs of a vulnerable claimant, and the same is true for social workers. Last but not least, the system privileges an approach where minimum income recipients must actively engage and prove deserving of support, which is not straightforward for claimants facing multiple disadvantages, such as the Roma.

In **Romania**, the refusal of a job offer from the Public Employment Service attracts benefit sanctions, while many Roma are unable to take up employment for many unrelated reasons, such as distance, dependents, health issues, unsuitable working conditions etc. Equally, recipients must engage in community work at the discretion of the mayor, providing hard labour in exchange for a very meagre monthly sum. Recipients also have to prove that they are actively searching for employment or engaging in professional training, while these are not easy for poor Roma residents living in remote communities. Minimum income is suspended in case of non-compliance, and even ended altogether if non-compliance occurs three times, for any reason.

In **Slovakia**, the obligation to provide community services as a condition for receiving minimum income was presented as a measure to compel recipients to acquire work habits. However, research suggests that this is not working in practice, as it keeps beneficiaries trapped in material need, since the amount received is not equivalent to an actual wage. The real reason is a culture where nothing is received for free, which contradicts the basic right to financial resources, while it exploits recipients as cheap labour. There is no sense in the public discourse or in law-making that adequate social protection is part of a solidarity approach that ensures wellbeing for all. Most Roma are not unemployed as a choice, and many worked for many years before job opportunities became scarce. Unemployment benefits, however, are only available if someone worked for at least 24 months on a regular employment contract, and they then only last for six months.

“Do you know how embarrassing it is to have to sweep the streets to receive the material need benefit? It’s a really lousy amount and I clean the streets or do other work for which they would otherwise have to pay a minimum wage.”

Roma man, 19, Slovakia

Antigypsyism and socio-economic discrimination

All five countries report that minimum income recipients, particularly if they are Roma, face widespread discrimination in the public discourse.

This is fuelled, on the one hand, by a generalised perception that social assistance are passive handouts, free money that is unearned. On the other hand, Roma claimants are often **subject of antigypsyism and face the common prejudice that Roma in particular refuse to work** and prefer to take advantage of generous benefits and state allowances. This is starkly contradicted by reality. Additionally, staff in **public services (Public Employment Services, Social Services etc) do not have the necessary anti-bias training, tools, and skills to deal with different categories of vulnerable recipients**, including those facing discrimination and generalised exclusion, such as the Roma.

In **Bulgaria**, Roma continue to face discrimination and fall victim to hate speech and hate crimes, segregated education, lack of health insurance, lack of effective measures to combat poverty and marginalization. In its 2018 Report on antigypsyism, the EU Fundamental Rights Agency concluded that discrimination "in the activities and work of public bodies and institutions in all areas and in all levels more often can create different forms of anti-Roma moods, which are most often expressed by not providing Roma with equal access to utilities and public services, in refusing to grant them equal rights and equal treatment..." This is a reality that extends beyond the social protection system and is present in every aspect of daily life. Targeted campaigns and sustained investments are needed in the long term to combat pervasive anti-Roma sentiments.

In the **Czech Republic**, it is common to find reluctance, misunderstanding and even aversion of public services staff to work with Roma claimants. The absence of the possibility to interact in the Romani language is an additional barrier. Some employees of Public Employment Services reject Roma applicants for extraordinary immediate assistance straight away, without even considering the claim. Antigypsyism is present also in other areas of daily life, such as the Roma being denied adequate housing, sometimes based only on a Romani last name. Discrimination manifests itself significantly also in the labour market, where Roma face rejection due to their ethnicity and societal prejudices.

A Roma woman asked for extraordinary immediate assistance and she was accompanied by a Roma field worker. The Public Employment Service staff person rejected the application and refused to engage in conversation with either the applicant or the field worker. When the woman returned accompanied by a non-Roma social worker, the behaviour of the PES employee changed, and the necessary support was provided. Here we see reluctance, dislike, and disinterest to work with some Roma clients, hence discrimination and antigypsyism.

Ostrava, Czech Republic

In **Hungary**, there is consensus in the national research that antigypsyism is notable. The prevalence of anti-Roma prejudice has remained stable for two decades, with the Fundamental Rights Agency noting that searching for a job or trying to access public or private services are the areas where more anti-Roma sentiments are present. There are good reasons to assume that this extends to public offices and state institutions. Personal prejudices of public servants usually carry into their office work. Additionally, discrimination and unequal behaviour have been observed not only towards Roma claimants, but overall towards those experiencing poverty and social exclusion, resulting in double stigma. A general attitude of blaming the poor and deeming them unworthy is coupled with widespread beliefs that benefit claimants, particularly Roma, are a burden on public finances and society.

In **Romania**, it is felt that there is insufficient research on the impact of antigypsyism on Roma access to rights, resources, and services. However, given a significant anti-Roma discourse in the media, there is an observed influence also on the delivery of services and social protection from this perspective. Social workers are supposed to be supportive and treat everybody equally, but particularly those working in remote, rural areas lack the necessary training to deal with complex situations of vulnerability. Some are of the view that poverty is somehow a personal choice or fault, while minimum income is nothing but a reward for laziness. These attitudes are very damaging, particularly for additionally vulnerable claimants such as the Roma.

In **Slovakia**, negative attitudes concerning Roma recipients of social assistance, and the associated stigma, are great obstacles to access. Antigypsyism occurs anecdotally during interaction with services, but there is a lack of data about the phenomenon, and people themselves are embarrassed to comment on humiliating experiences. Misleading information is circulated widely through media and social media about Roma parents receiving outrageously high benefits from the state in child allowances, which fuelled a wave of antigypsyist comments and attitudes. Such narratives are also used by extremist groups to arouse anti-Roma sentiments. It is also brought up during election campaigns, when politicians often employ populist discourses about cleaning the system of those who take undue advantage. The effect is felt also in mixed communities, breeding resentment on false pretences between the Roma residents and the majority populations. The Government is failing in its duty to dispel these untruths and provide accurate information.

> **"I have 5 children and I have never received more than the law stipulates, and definitely not more just because I am a Roma. If I were to make money on child allowances, we would have to receive at least 300 euro a month for every child, which is nonsense, of course. And if it were so, everybody would get it, not just the Roma."**
>
> Roma woman, 45, Slovakia

Roma take-up of minimum income

Despite the claims mentioned in the previous section, evidence from most of the five countries shows that **the share of Roma receiving minimum income (or social assistance in general) is, in fact, quite low.** Given the much higher rates of poverty and social exclusion that the Roma face in these countries, it is worrying that this share is not higher.

> This indicates that persistent barriers and disincentives for Roma exist in accessing benefits, whether related to the low amount of the benefits, the complex application and eligibility procedure, or the attached conditionality and sanctions.

In **Bulgaria**, only 12% of Roma receive minimum income. This share has not changed since 2013, as indicated by the Open Society Institute, even though the vast majority of Bulgarian Roma live in poverty. The Agency of Social Assistance in Bulgaria does not collect ethnicity data, so it is difficult to obtain accurate information. More transparency around this would be very beneficial to reduce stigma and improve take-up. Nonetheless, it is presumed that the number of Roma claimants decreased in 2021. There are no objective grounds for continued public statements condemning the Roma for "living on the back of the Bulgarian tax-payer" and not wanting to work. As revealed by the National Statistics Institute, even when they access employment, the Roma have the highest percentage of working poor. Even those Roma who receive minimum income benefits do provide community work in exchange for it, but most are discouraged from even applying by the very complex process and hard to implement conditionality, particularly for such a low monthly amount.

According to the local authorities in Tzenovo, 820 Roma are registered in the villages of the municipality at a permanent address. Out of these, only 16-17 Roma receive monthly social assistance. In Kaspichan, only 50 people receive minimum income, out of a total of 2770 Roma.

Bulgaria

In the **Czech Republic**, it is not possible to find out how many benefit claimants are Roma. There are no official statistics disaggregated by ethnicity or other factors and authorities only provide total numbers. Even if statistics were kept, many Roma in the Czech Republic do not identify as such in the national census, so official numbers of Roma residents are much lower than reality. This, however, does not deter widespread public prejudice built around the idea that the Roma are lazy, do not want to work, and abuse the social system. This is part of wider anti-Roma sentiment in the country, which makes it difficult for people to break out of a cycle of disadvantage and discrimination.

In **Hungary**, there is no hard or even soft data collection on the percentage of Roma beneficiaries, which is estimated by researchers at 40%-50% in the public works scheme and as recipients of the employment substitution benefit. This clearly demonstrates that reliance on social protection is not a “Roma story”. The percentages are too low to justify the public narrative, but high enough to show that too many Roma experience poverty and unemployment. However, the public discourse tends to pit Roma recipients, seen as taking advantage of the welfare state, against the majority population. This shapes attitudes and increases tensions in communities where Roma live alongside non-Roma. A public opinion survey revealed that roughly 80% of respondents believe that the root cause of Roma exclusion is their unwillingness to work, while only 11% think more should be done to support them. These public attitudes, reflected also in the political discourse, are consistent with the country’s shift from social fairness and equality towards a penalising approach which blames the poor for their predicament.

In **Romania**, according to data included in the National Strategy for Roma Inclusion, 10% of Roma families identify minimum income as their main source of income. Minimum income recipients (and benefit claimants more broadly) are highly stigmatised by the media, the public, and local authorities. Populist, extremist hate speech targeting particularly Roma recipients is rampant. This narrative supports the idea that people do not want to work and therefore employers do not find enough workers (the labour shortage is true, but that is due to very poor wages and working conditions offered), while portraying social assistance recipients as lazy and undeserving.

In **Slovakia**, only 36% of people in material need living in marginalised Roma communities receive a housing allowance. Although they are entitled to it, the conditions are too difficult to meet for Roma people living in these communities. In December 2019, only 31% of all child allowances went to Roma parents, even in districts with very high Roma populations.

Meanwhile, the general discourse continues in the direction of meritocracy, as if minimum income recipients were undeserving of support, particularly as they are Roma. There is no understanding that Roma people face additional difficulties in finding employment or accessing services such as housing, education, and healthcare, and poverty is not a choice.

> **“What to do, when no one wants to give us a job? I’m old, but not old enough to receive a retirement pension. I also have some health problems, but I would go to work. But if there is nowhere to go, then what should I do? We live here in a region where not even the majority has a job, but even so, they will only talk about us Roma, that we do not want to work. At the same time, the majority is at home receiving social benefits. But do we blame them for it? No, because we know what it’s like to live in poverty.”**
>
> Roma man, 59, Slovakia

Minimum income and National Roma Strategic Frameworks

In 2021, the European Union adopted a **Roma Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion, and Participation**, where one of the three main horizontal objectives explicitly states “Reduce poverty and social exclusion to close the socio-economic gap between Roma and the general population”, with a subobjective aimed to “Cut the poverty gap between Roma and general population by at least half, to **ensure that by 2030 the majority of Roma escape poverty**” (*our bold*). Member States were invited to prepare National Roma Frameworks. The document explicitly says that, in doing so, the role of National Roma Contact Points should be strengthened to, inter alia, “ensure that public policies and universal services reach out to Roma effectively, including those living in remote rural areas (e.g. emergency and medium-term measures in times of crisis, legislative reform, policy planning on education, employment, healthcare, housing, other areas of socio-economic inclusion, social services, transport, minimum income systems, anti-discrimination legislation)” (*our underlining*). In the five countries reviewed in this research report, however,

improving Roma access to adequate minimum income schemes (and social protection overall) does not seem to be prioritised in the National Roma Frameworks, judging by the drafts publicly available at the time of writing.

In **Bulgaria**, the draft National Roma Framework contains no reference to the role of minimum income schemes in reducing Roma poverty. The focus of the Framework is instead on access to housing, education, employment, and health.

In the **Czech Republic**, the National Roma Framework 2021-2030 states that, despite the high number of beneficiaries of assistance in material need, the situation of persons at risk of social exclusion is not improving. The document lists seven strategic goals: support emancipation and participation; fight antigypsyism; guarantee Roma children access to inclusive education; improve access to housing, including social housing; more employment, including opportunities for Roma companies; better health; increased capacity and resources for implementing the Framework. It does not explicitly focus on social benefits and minimum income.

In **Hungary**, the version of the National Roma Framework from 3 September "reaffirms the Hungarian government's commitment to eradicating poverty and raising the profile of Roma" through reducing the share of people living in social and material deprivation from 22.9% in 2019 to 13% in 2030, while the poverty gap is to be reduced by 20% from 38.7% in 2020. While several measures are foreseen regarding education, training, and employment, any reform of the social welfare system is missing from the text.

In **Romania**, the draft National Roma Framework of July 2021 only refers to the national minimum income scheme once, indicating that 10% of Roma households identify minimum income as the main source of income for the family, which is 8% higher than in previous measurements. However, no other reference to social protection is included, as the document focuses instead on Roma labour market integration (one of the five stated objectives of the National Framework) as a means to decrease reliance on public social assistance.

In **Slovakia**, the National Roma Framework includes several objectives related to increasing education and skills, expanding the availability and support provided by public employment services, supporting integration in the labour market (including through social economy), and reducing discrimination, antigypsyism, and anti-Roma racism. Despite these very relevant commitments, nothing is said about improving Roma access to minimum income schemes and social protection, or about addressing the inadequacy of the schemes.

CONCLUSIONS

In all five countries, **the Roma population experiences very high rates of poverty and social exclusion** compared to the majority population, while their access to rights, resources, and services is significantly impaired, due to both poverty itself, as well as **prevailing antigypsyism**. Because of inherent design flaws, **social protection systems and minimum income schemes in these countries do not adequately fulfil their role in reducing poverty** and deprivation overall, as precisely those people needing these supports the most, such as Roma residents, find themselves further excluded. If Governments are serious about their duty to provide dignified lives and equal opportunities for all, **access to and adequacy of social protection must be urgently improved.** Doing so would have a decisive impact on national poverty rates, and especially on the poverty rates of vulnerable groups such as the Roma, which would be **beneficial for societies and economies at large.**

Bulgaria, as noted in the European Commission Country Report 2017 (and highlighted in subsequent Country Specific Recommendations), “has one of the least-effective social transfer systems in the EU and one of the lowest levels of social transfers. The government spent just 0.2% of GDP in 2015 on monthly social benefits and the heating allowance, which is the core of the minimum income scheme. The eligibility rules are very restrictive, leaving many poor families without support. […] This has eroded the protection capacity of social benefits and contributed to increased inequality in the country.” True political will is needed for a rehaul of the system to address this situation, as well as to combat negative stereotypes about benefit claimants in general and Roma minimum income recipients in particular. Punitive, restrictive measures, with high levels of stigmatization and discrimination, are only fuelling the problems for the entire Bulgarian society.

In the **Czech Republic**, public policy has not yet led to an improvement in the situation and position of the Roma minority, particularly regarding their high rates of social exclusion and poverty. Most measures currently in place are repressive in nature and do not comprehensively address the situation, but rather deepen it. This repressive reaction only strengthens the majority's view that the Roma themselves are the source of their own problems. Poverty is a systemic phenomenon which affects adults and children alike, but the structural lack of equal opportunities is even used to remove children from poor families deemed unfit. While the social security system is rather generous and comprehensive, it is demotivating for applicants, and creates a lock-in effect. Many Roma are bound by foreclosures and trapped in exploitative employment. The low level of the national minimum wage discourages people from seeking legal work. While the housing allowance is generous, it is often transferred directly to landlords, and claimants struggle with meeting daily costs and debt payments. Roma poverty and social exclusion could be addressed by a comprehensive reform of the social system, including adequate minimum income, within a broader framework that prioritises a root-causes approach, instead of dealing with punctual phenomena.

In **Hungary**, despite a modest reduction in poverty, roughly 20% of the population lived below the poverty line at the beginning of 2021. Minimum income schemes are undoubtedly relevant for the Roma minority in Hungary, significantly more exposed to poverty than the majority non-Roma. However, the Hungarian scheme is among the poorest performing ones in the EU in terms of adequacy, coverage, take up, impact on poverty reduction, link to quality services etc, and its spending is the lowest amount per inhabitant in the EU. Minimum income does not fulfil its stated purpose of preventing destitution and ensuring a decent standard of living. It does not guarantee people's fundamental social rights, nor is it conducive to social participation – instead, it acts as a barrier to true social and systemic change. Roma claimants still face undeniable antigypsyism in all areas of life, including in accessing benefits, while public discourse blames them for both their poverty and their ethnicity. While general political will seems to be lacking to address this, the Zugló experience below provides a solid example on how adequate schemes could be built.

The Zugló Social Model is a minimum income scheme that was introduced in one of the districts of the city of Budapest by the local government, with the participation of the Budapest Institute think tank. The minimum income offered was more generous (first 26 000 HUF, then 28 500 HUF) than its national counterpart (22 800 HUF), as well as more targeted. The Model takes into account household needs and provides support also for housing, debt management, and job search through cooperation with the Family Assistance Centre of Zugló. It also featured relatively few conditions to be met, aside the obligation of means testing. Recipients benefited also from personalised assistance in overcoming barriers to find employment. This type of wrap-around, comprehensive intervention, combining adequate income support with access to services and the labour market, is consistent with an integrated Active Inclusion approach, and a positive practice to be replicated broadly.

Budapest, Hungary

In **Romania**, accessing social benefits only has a very small impact on getting out of poverty. The only way to efficiently reduce poverty using minimum income schemes is to periodically update the monthly amounts, correlated with real needs and economic indicators such as inflation. The future minimum inclusion income (a benefit scheme planned to be implemented in future, cumulating a number of currently existing ones) must foresee a monthly level that allows for a decent life. This has to be complemented with wrap-around support and services, including for accessing the labour market. Minimum income schemes are crucial for those living in extreme and deep poverty, and many Roma are among them. Removing the strict link between minimum income and residence requirements would significantly improve take-up, as it is currently a major barrier in the case of many poor Roma, whose security of tenure is relative and whose housing situation is precarious. Measures to curb hate speech and antigypsyism, including online, as well as better education and training for an inclusive public discourse would also go a long way.

In **Slovakia**, poverty is perceived as a result of personal weakness, failure, and inadequacy. It is hence viewed as an individual problem, and as such an individual responsibility to combat. However, what is needed is a structural approach, looking at root causes and systemic issues outside the control of individuals: a shortage of jobs that pay a living wage; a corporate profit-making strategy predicated on the reduction of labour costs; government policy that caters to the concerns of the wealthy while ignoring the interests of working-class families; a political and media rhetoric that variously disparages the poor, treats them as objects of charity, and renders them invisible; and the persistence of discrimination, residential segregation, and social isolation. Improving access to quality and inclusive education, as well as to adequate and affordable housing and quality, free healthcare remains essential, combined with employment opportunities that provide decent wages. Access to adequate income support should be complementary to these efforts, alongside the fight against antigypsyism and discrimination.

RECOMMENDATIONS

BULGARIA

Increase Guaranteed Minimum Income.
The monthly allowance is currently below the poverty line. In order for social assistance to have a strong effect on living conditions, the amount of the GMI should be significantly increased – for instance to be doubled.

Stop the punitive conditionality.
Allow people to miss or postpone a monthly scheduled meeting for sound reasons such as impossibility to travel, particularly for those living in remote areas. Foresee also the possibility for Public Employment Service personnel to travel to the residencies instead.

Provide integrated support.
The social assistance system must cooperate closely with other state services dealing with poverty, unemployment, exclusion and marginalisation. Comprehensive provision of services, training, and targeted employment support would help avoid keeping benefit claimants trapped in poverty.

Expand the capacities and skills of Public Employment Services,

so they can provide the needed support to those marginalised, the elderly, those not knowing how to read or write. Provide anti-discrimination training and sensibilisation to Roma issues.

Support Roma mediators.

Local authorities and public services should train and hire Roma mediators, who are mindful of the specific circumstances of Roma communities and also speak Romani.

Combat the stigmatisation of the Roma community,

both in general and as permanent clients of the social welfare system and build positive narratives of integration and living together.

Cooperate with active community members.

Local authorities and Public Employment Services should maintain close links with the communities they serve, with the full involvement of Roma residents, as well as civil society initiatives present on the ground.

CZECH REPUBLIC

Provide personalized support, rather than sanctions.

The role of Public Employment Services is to support applicants, not create additional hurdles. Moreover, they must act in a “friendly and objective manner” (according to the Supreme Administrative Court). The application process must be simple, clearly communicated, and respectfully enforced. In case of objective reason for curtailing benefits, proportionality should be applied.

Employ adequate staff.

Roma assistants can play a crucial role in bridging procedural gaps and allowing Roma claimants to fulfil the requirements of the application process, allowing for intercultural communication and support. This should be coupled with necessary training for non-Roma staff to adequately respond to the needs of Roma applicants.

Cover the assessment period.

The investigation period to determine eligibility currently lasts 30-60 days, during which a person is left without income. Curtail the period as much as possible and disburse extraordinary immediate assistance within 48-72h. Simplify the documents procedure needed for this particular benefit.

Cancel vouchers.

The payment of the living allowance in the form of vouchers makes life very difficult for recipients and does not contribute to an improvement of their income situation. Replace the vouchers with adequate cash payments.

Allow side-income from different sources.

A possible solution is the setting of a maximum amount of extra income when drawing benefits for material need, where families will be motivated to improve their living situation without fear of losing benefits that contribute to a dignified life.

Unify and simplify delivery, including of housing benefits,

across forms of state social support benefits and benefits for material need. Housing benefits should be combined, backed by a valid law on social housing and rent control, flexibilising rules on supplement-free zones, hostels, or “worse” housing conditions. Expand the funeral benefit to more family members.

HUNGARY

Update the amount of minimum income.
After a decade, it is necessary to reassess the unchanged amount of *employment substitution benefit* according to European standards and raise it accordingly to a level that exceeds its 2012 yearly amount (28 500 HUF).

Offer adequate wages for the Public Works Scheme.
Participants should be given a real perspective to receive the minimum wage within the foreseeable future.

Analyse the root causes of non-take-up.
Support more research into the systemic causes of exclusion as a significant step forward in achieving evidence-based policies that are successful in the fight against poverty.

Combat stigmatising attitudes.
The Hungarian society must be strongly sensitized to the support of those in need and to everyday solidarity, changing the general attitude inclined to criminalise poverty and the poor. That includes changing public, political and media rhetoric concerning the general picture of the poor and the Roma.

Involve all stakeholders, including Roma.
A truly fair, adequate, coherent and complex minimum income scheme needs to be developed and implemented based on wide-ranging social, professional and stakeholder consultations, taking into account relevant EU legislation.

A new European Year.
After more than 10 years it is time again to organise a European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion with a special focus on Roma, Digitalization and Green Future.

ROMANIA

Improve the adequacy of minimum income schemes.

A person cannot live in dignity on the current amount, and the Social Reference Index urgently needs to be updated.

Remove obstacles to access.

It is currently very difficult for most potential Roma recipients to comply with the necessary paperwork to fulfil the strict eligibility criteria and to cover the costs of the application procedure.

Allow for benefits to be combined with paid work.

If it cannot be combined with income from employment, the minimum income scheme acts as an incentive to engage in informal work.

Combat stigma and antigypsyism.

Discrimination against minimum income claimants receiving a meagre amount is one of the main sources of continued and pervasive antigypsyism. The proliferation of such hate speech in the last years in Romania is worrying, coupled with an ongoing tendency to reduce the number of claimants.

Expand access to health insurance.

Signing up to receive social welfare is the only way for poor Roma to access the medical system. People receiving minimum income (and people receiving other benefits like parental leave) receive health insurance without being contributors, but the low number of claimants means that many miss out.

SLOVAKIA

Raise the level of monthly payments.
The amount of the benefit for material need is not sufficient and does not cover even the most basic needs. It should be increased at least to the level of the poverty line in the country, coupled with the reference budgets methodology, to make it compatible with a life in dignity.

Combat discrimination and stigmatisation and enshrine a rights-based approach.
Human dignity is not considered in the equation, in favour of a merit-only approach. Stereotypes and prejudices need to be tackled, and new impetus given to the fight against antigypsyism, including institutional antigypsyism.

Make full use of the National Roma Framework.
This provides a great opportunity to bring change to the lives of Roma in excluded communities. The Government must now step up its commitments to implement the framework.

Invest in systemic approaches.
Poverty is a structural disease of the system and needs to be seen as such; it cannot be addressed as an individual failure. It is very important to break away from merit and understand that being poor is the result of systemic failure, discrimination and inequality.

Better monitoring of EU funds.
A better assessment and monitoring tool is needed to control the use of EU funds in Member States, in the fight against Roma poverty and exclusion.

Increase Roma participation.
National programmes need to be developed together with the communities affected. Better coordination between central and local government is also needed, as well as with grassroots actors such as civil society.