



Brussels, 4 December 2024
(OR. en)

16392/24

SOC 890
EMPL 603
COH 76
ANTIDISCRIM 172

OUTCOME OF PROCEEDINGS

From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Delegations
No. prev. doc.:	15610/24
Subject:	Council Conclusions on improving access to enabling services and employment services in order to promote the social inclusion of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion, including Roma, by reducing territorial inequalities

Delegations will find attached the Council Conclusions on the above subject approved by the EPSCO Council at its meeting held on 2 December 2024.

Council Conclusions

on improving access to enabling services and employment services in order to promote the social inclusion of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion, including Roma, by reducing territorial inequalities

ACKNOWLEDGING THAT:

1. Respect for human dignity, freedom and human rights are fundamental values of the European Union. The EU is committed to the elimination of inequalities, the fight against poverty and social exclusion, combating discrimination, and the strengthening of economic, social and territorial cohesion.
2. The European Pillar of Social Rights highlights, inter alia, that everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning (Principle 1), to equal opportunities (Principle 3), and to active support to employment (Principle 4). Moreover, children have the right to protection from poverty and to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality (Principle 11). The latter can also contribute to equality between women and men, which must be ensured in all areas (Principle 2). Everyone lacking sufficient resources has the right to adequate minimum income benefits ensuring a life in dignity at all stages of life, and to effective access to enabling goods and services (Principle 14), and everyone has the right to timely affordable, preventive and curative healthcare (Principle 16). The Pillar also refers to access to social housing or housing assistance for those in need (Principle 19) and access to essential services of good quality (Principle 20).

3. The Council Recommendation on Roma equality, inclusion and participation adopted by the Council in 2021 called on the Member States to consolidate efforts to effectively prevent and combat social and economic exclusion and their root causes, and to that end, to pursue an integrated approach. In addition to preventing and tackling antigypsyism as a cross-cutting priority as part of the fight against discrimination and segregation, for all sectoral objectives covered by the Recommendation such as education, employment, health care, housing and essential services it recommended that Member States ensure effective equal access without barriers to those services. The Council also recommended that Member States encourage regional and local authorities to develop or update their local action or desegregation plans, as well as their strategic frameworks, and that these contain measures, baselines, benchmarks, measurable objectives and funding allocations.
4. The European Commission recommends in its guidelines for planning and implementing national Roma strategic frameworks that national Roma strategic frameworks target interventions territorially to ensure that they take into account local conditions and combine territorial and social group targeting in the form of broad interventions (e.g. to tackle extreme poverty), and tackle the digital exclusion of Roma. Member States are encouraged to ensure that such interventions reach Roma. The indicators necessary for monitoring, reflecting residential segregation, the geographical aspects of the situation of Roma, and access to services and infrastructure in different areas, are still to be developed further.
5. The 2021 Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee recommends that Member States guarantee that children in need have effective and where relevant free access to services under its scope. To that end, Member States are recommended to follow an integrated and multidisciplinary approach when addressing the territorial dimension of social exclusion, taking into account the specific situation of the children concerned in urban, rural, remote and disadvantaged areas.

6. The 2023 Council Recommendation on developing social economy framework conditions highlights the contribution of the social economy to the social inclusion of disadvantaged and underrepresented groups. Member States are recommended to establish or encourage partnership initiatives that involve social economy entities in the design and delivery of active labour market policies as well as people-centred social and care services.
7. In its resolution adopted in 2022, the European Parliament emphasised that many Roma in Europe still live in poverty and are socially excluded, a problem that goes hand in hand with territorial segregation and unequal access to services. It noted that many Roma live in socio-economically disadvantaged regions and called on the Commission and the Member States to urgently address the situation of Roma people living in settlements in a comprehensive and effective manner, with appropriate policies and funding.
8. The report of the High-Level Group on the future of social protection and the welfare state in the EU emphasises ‘the importance of an inclusive and fair welfare state’ and finds, inter alia, that digitalisation and technological change present both risks and opportunities, while gaps in skills and IT access carry the risk of increasing inequalities. The report suggests, moreover, that technological developments create opportunities for the organisation and efficiency of social protection. With this in mind, the High-Level Group recommends inter alia that Member States improve service provision at local level and make the most of digitalisation opportunities. It also recommends that social inclusion and equal access to public transport should be part of urban and rural planning and supported by public subsidies, with particular attention being paid to deprived areas.
9. The European Union and its Member States make continuous efforts to strengthen economic, social and territorial cohesion. Through its cohesion policy, the EU aims to reduce disparities between the levels of development of the various regions, with particular attention paid to rural areas, areas affected by the industrial transition, and regions with severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps. The EU supports the implementation of agreed objectives promoting territorial cohesion and socio-economic development through cohesion policy funding with a particular focus on less developed regions.

10. The European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) is a key EU funding tool for investing in employment, education and skills as well as social inclusion. It supports, inter alia, the promotion of the socio-economic integration of marginalised communities such as Roma and third country nationals, including migrants, and the social integration of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion including the most deprived persons and children. All Member States are obliged to allocate at least 25% of their European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) resources to the promotion of social inclusion and at least 3% to measures supporting the most deprived, by addressing material deprivation through food and/or basic material assistance and providing accompanying measures supporting their social inclusion, or by promoting the social integration of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Member States with a level of child poverty above the EU average are required to allocate at least 5% of their ESF+ resources to tackle it.
11. While highlighting the successes of the EU's cohesion policy, especially in terms of continued upward convergence in the EU, the Commission's ninth Cohesion report on economic, social and territorial cohesion, published in March 2024, points out that territorial disparities still remain and affect Europe's overall economic and socio-economic development. Not all regions benefit from the same growth dynamics. These differences in economic trends are partly reflected in labour market and educational differences, and despite the convergence observed in the EU, challenges remain, such as sub-national inequalities between large metropolitan areas and other regions lagging behind, including regions caught in a 'development trap'. The report also points out that in urban regions people have better access to education and training as well as health services. The metropolitan regions concentrate human capital, ensure high quality of services and because of this, they naturally attract investment. However, their attractiveness can also come at a price: higher congestion, social challenges, and housing costs, which may undermine their competitiveness. In general, territorial polarisation caused by internal divergencies in socio-economic development can undermine the competitiveness of the Member States and the EU, as well as the sustainability of growth in the long term. A more polycentric development model building on small and medium-sized cities and promoting accessibility of public services in areas far from large urban centres could serve to mitigate these territorial imbalances.

12. In the same report, the Commission also points out that between 2013 and 2019 the proportion of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) decreased from 35% to 28% in less developed regions, while it remained unchanged at 19% in more developed regions. The AROPE rate in the EU decreased between 2015 and 2019 and remained unchanged from then until 2022 in towns, suburbs and sparsely populated areas. In the seven years to 2022, this rate decreased by an average of 2.4 percentage points to 22%, and the decrease was particularly large in rural areas (4.3 percentage points), and in certain Member States the decrease was even higher (7.4 percentage points).
13. If left unaddressed, demographic challenges can become a long-term constraint to the EU's competitiveness and a growing threat to cohesion due to the risk of widening disparities between and within regions. These challenges are most acute in remote and rural areas and regions, where the challenges of depopulation, demographic ageing and a shrinking workforce are most prevalent. Thus a necessary and effective step in the fight against poverty and social exclusion is the reduction of territorial inequalities, including through improving access to services at local level, which can contribute to the competitiveness of the EU.
14. In 2022, 7.6%¹ of people who were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the European Union could not afford to have an internet connection, as compared with 2.4% of the overall population of the EU,² which shows significant disparities between the Member States. In 2023, only 56% of people aged 16-74 in the EU had at least basic digital skills³. Also important is the urban and rural divide. In rural areas, access to broadband connections and mobile networks may be limited, of inferior quality, or come at a higher cost⁴. Meanwhile, the level of formal education impacts the level of digital skills. The gap in basic digital skills between highly educated individuals (80%) and those with no or low formal education (34%) in the EU stood at 46 percentage points⁵.

¹ In 2021, the figure was 8.4%.

² European Commission, Report on Access to Essential Services in the EU, June 2023

³ Eurostat, 'Glossary: Digital Skills Indicator', August 2023

⁴ European Commission, Report on Access to Essential Services in the EU, June 2023

⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Skills_for_the_digital_age

15. The findings of the 2021 Roma survey of the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) show that Roma across Europe face high levels of deprivation, marginalisation, discrimination and social exclusion. The proportion of Roma living in households at risk of poverty varies across the countries⁶ covered by the survey. As many as 80% of Roma are at risk of poverty (AROP) and this did not change between 2016 and 2021. On average, the AROP figure is highest among Roma living in cities (densely populated areas, 87%) and rural areas (thinly populated areas, 83%). In towns and suburbs (intermediate density areas) it is 78%. The survey findings show that more Roma complete at least upper secondary education in urban areas compared to rural areas. Regarding employment, only 43% of Roma aged 20-64 years were in paid work across the eight EU Member States⁷ surveyed, regardless of whether they lived in rural or urban areas.
16. In the same report, on average, 55% of Roma have an internet connection for personal use when needed. The proportion decreases to 47% for Roma living in rural areas, and increases to 60% for Roma in cities, towns and suburbs. The difference is even bigger when comparing Roma who live in households at risk of poverty (52%) and those who do not (71%). Only 34% of Roma in rural areas have a computer, as compared with 43% in cities and 42% in towns and suburbs.

⁶ Croatia, Czechia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, North Macedonia, Portugal, Romania, Serbia and Spain.

⁷ Croatia, Czechia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Portugal, Romania and Spain.

17. The opinion of the European Committee of the Regions highlights the role of local and regional authorities in ensuring equitable access to essential services. The opinion underlines the challenges faced in delivering social services, particularly in remote and underserved areas, due to disparities in infrastructure, digital access and skilled personnel, as well as fiscal constraints. It advocates for a comprehensive regional development strategy that integrates poverty reduction, social inclusion, digital literacy and lifelong learning, while calling for targeted investments in deprived areas. Furthermore, it emphasizes, inter alia, the need for improved service delivery models, enhanced cross-border cooperation, the importance of modernizing digital infrastructure and public transport services. In addition to this opinion, impact assessments with territorial aspects, such as those regularly conducted by the European Committee of the Regions, are important for analysing and mitigating the potential asymmetric effects of individual EU measures across the various EU territories.

UNDERLINING THAT:

18. Despite the slight improvement in the situation since 2019, around 95 million Europeans remained at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2023, which shows that reaching the 2030 headline target⁸ and the national targets for poverty reduction will require more rapid progress and further efforts before the end of the decade. Although Member States face different challenges in effectively addressing the needs of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion, including Roma, promoting social and territorial cohesion and reducing territorial inequalities is a common endeavour which can support to the pursuit of the EU's poverty reduction target, of competitiveness and of sustainable and inclusive growth.

⁸ One of the EU 2030 headline targets of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan is a reduction of at least 15 million in the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion (of which at least 5 million should be children) compared to the 2019 level.

19. In accordance with their national circumstances, and within the broader context of their respective social inclusion policies and in line with the EU Roma strategic framework, Member States have prepared national Roma strategic frameworks to support Roma in the EU in seven key areas of focus: equality, inclusion, participation, education, employment, health and housing. While the aim is full equality, including fighting and preventing antigypsyism and discrimination, the Commission has proposed minimum targets for 2030, which require adequate policies to be put in place by the Member States. The implementation and monitoring of these frameworks require further efforts, in close cooperation with all relevant stakeholders.
20. Territorial and social inequalities, including the situation and territorial location of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion, including Roma, vary significantly between Member States. In the European Union's approach to territorial development, tools based on strategic territorial planning and different territorial characteristics, as well as the importance of local innovations, are increasingly emphasised, and the establishment of partnerships is an increasingly important aspect. In terms of regional development practices and their effective implementation in Member States, many unexploited opportunities remain.

21. Although the European Union and its Member States make continuous efforts to promote economic, social and territorial cohesion, different challenges and gaps in convergence can be identified not only between Member States or regions, but also at sub-regional level. Certain parts of municipalities (especially in larger cities), or even entire municipalities, such as smaller villages, can become territories with a high share of people at risk of being socially excluded. Complex challenges such as socio-economic disadvantages and changes, are often present in these disadvantaged territories and may cause high levels of unemployment. In addition to lack of essential services⁹, the availability of quality enabling services¹⁰ and employment services that play a role in social inclusion and contribute to social cohesion is also a characteristic challenge. Disadvantaged territories are often home to persons that face poverty and multiple forms of exclusion, segregation and discrimination, and who often belong to minorities, such as Roma, or have a migrant background.
22. The full and active participation and inclusion of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion, including Roma, and measures to fight against discrimination, segregation and antigypsyism are essential for ensuring equal and effective access to quality enabling services and employment services.

⁹ In accordance with Principle 20 of the European Pillar of Social Rights, the following services include: water, sanitation, energy, transport, financial services and digital communications.

¹⁰ In accordance with the Council Recommendation of 30 January 2023 on adequate minimum income ensuring active inclusion, ‘enabling services’ mean services targeting the specific needs of persons lacking sufficient resources to ensure that they are able to integrate in society and, where relevant, the labour market, including social inclusion services, for example social work, counselling, coaching, mentoring, psychological support, rehabilitation and other general enabling services, including early childhood education and care, healthcare, long-term care, education and training, and housing. [paragraph (2) point f)]

23. Universal measures complemented by targeted measures aim at ensuring active inclusion. Inclusive social, infrastructural and service networks at local and regional level that ensure effective and equal access for all can support social cohesion and inclusive growth. In addition, the availability and affordability of transport is essential for accessing enabling services and employment services. More efficient utilisation of resources at regional level; strengthening of local networks; counselling and other forms of support, are also important factors in terms of ensuring the sustainability of developments and their sub-regional and community embeddedness, and mainstreaming social inclusion in regional developments. Those measures should include a gender mainstreaming perspective.
24. The digital transition has accelerated in the context of globalisation and technological progress. In addition to the challenges it presents, digitalisation can provide significant social and economic benefits and offers opportunities to improve the availability of quality, accessible and affordable enabling services and employment services. However, the rapid pace of the digital transition can lead to digital exclusion, with individuals, households, enterprises and geographical areas having different levels of access to information and communication technologies, including the internet. In order to ensure social inclusion, it is essential that measures be taken to address digital exclusion and to support people in need, taking into account their digital and language skills. It is also important to continue to ensure the provision of non-digital services in order to meet the needs of persons who face barriers to the use of online services. It is also important to recognise that digitalisation measures can make it more difficult for people in need to access the services they need.
25. This set of conclusions builds on previous work and political commitments voiced by the Council of the European Union, the European Commission, the European Parliament and relevant stakeholders in this area, including the documents listed in the annex.

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

26. Takes note of the European Commission's report on the implementation of the Council recommendation on Roma equality, inclusion and participation, which points to the need to strengthen efforts to implement the recommendation, taking into account the Commission's findings and this set of conclusions.

INVITES THE MEMBER STATES, in accordance with their national competences, and circumstances, TO

27. Promote the coherence, effectiveness and embeddedness of their regional development strategies and their local and micro-regional social inclusion policies, with particular emphasis on people at risk of poverty or social exclusion, including Roma, with the aim of ensuring equal access to quality enabling services and employment services for all, regardless of where people live, by:
- a. supporting the preparation and implementation of place-based strategies or action plans, including, where relevant, territorial desegregation measures, and maintaining or gaining the necessary capacities and expertise for the development of those strategies or plans, for example by issuing guidelines;
 - b. ensuring adequate or strengthening existing multi-level governance and well-established consultation and participation mechanisms, enabling those working at different levels of government in all relevant sectors to collaborate in policy planning, implementation and evaluation, as well as to coordinate and mutually reinforce their interventions and adapt them, based on high-quality, timely and reliable data disaggregated by sex and age, to the local/micro-regional needs of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion, including Roma. Stakeholders such as civil society, representatives of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion, including Roma, organisations and experts working for social inclusion, social economy entities and the social partners, in line with their role and autonomy, should be involved in the consultation mechanisms;

- c. supporting the territorial cooperation of local authorities, municipalities and territorial entities (including, where relevant, in cross-border and transnational contexts), so that the challenges in access to quality enabling services and employment services can be tackled through the more efficient use of available resources;
- d. improving the identification and mapping of disadvantaged or residentially segregated territories (municipalities and/or parts of municipalities) where a high share of the population is living in poverty or experiencing social exclusion. This can be based, for instance, on an appropriate mix of social and economic indicators disaggregated by sex and age (e.g. including employment rate, level of income, material deprivation, education, training and skills, healthcare, housing, transport, or where relevant, indicators on persons with migrant background etc.);
- e. improving the knowledge and expertise among the relevant staff of service providers by raising awareness and offering training on equal treatment and combating discrimination.
- f. supporting, with the use of existing EU and national funds, integrated local/micro-regional developments that respond to complex challenges in disadvantaged or residentially segregated territories.
- g. paying attention to the different characteristics of rural and urban areas, and making even more effective use of the opportunities provided by existing tools, such as community-led planning or social planning, including in developments aimed at the social inclusion of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion, including Roma.
- h. making best use of all available funding, while ensuring complementarities and integrated approaches, as well as the long-term sustainability of the results.
- i. regularly monitoring and evaluating the impact of the developments and funds used for social inclusion.

28. Pay attention to the territorial aspects of improving access to quality enabling services and employment services, and to tackling territorial inequalities that hinder social inclusion. As a possible means to this end, Member States could:
- a. support integrated measures that combine developments in the field of employment, social inclusion, housing, health and long-term care and childcare, education and training to address the needs of members of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion, including Roma with a particular focus on young people, as well as women and where relevant persons with a migrant background;
 - b. make use of digital technology, including electronic public services, with a view to improving equality of access. In order to meet the needs of persons who face barriers to the use of online services, continue to ensure adequate provision of non-digital services and the availability of public transport;
 - c. support access to digital technologies for people at risk of poverty or social exclusion, including Roma, by developing infrastructure to improve internet connections and by taking concrete measures to improve digital skills, thereby reducing digital exclusion;
 - d. use the opportunities provided by digital technology to reduce disadvantages related to skills, particularly in peripheral and remote areas; and
 - e. involve the non-public sector in the design and delivery of service to promote social inclusion.

**INVITES THE MEMBER STATES AND THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION, IN
ACCORDANCE WITH THEIR RESPECTIVE COMPETENCES, TO**

29. Ensure that community and place-based policies foster regional development while reducing internal disparities including spatial segregation and exclusion and supporting access to relevant services. Strengthening cooperation between relevant policy areas and between all levels of governance, ensuring gender mainstreaming as well as taking into consideration the specific needs of people living in the same disadvantaged territory (such as the needs of children or persons with disabilities) are also key factors in order to ensure that social inclusion aspects are well reflected and mainstreamed in regional, rural and urban development.
30. Strive to pursue a territorial approach and to assess the effectiveness of developments from a territorial perspective in national and EU-level reports on and evaluations of the implementation of national strategic frameworks, including for improving the situation of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion, including Roma, and their access to services.

INVITES THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION TO

31. Consider the significance of the reduction of territorial inequalities in the new action plan on the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights and in the upcoming EU anti-poverty strategy.
32. Consider reviewing the voluntary European Quality Framework for social services jointly with the Social Protection Committee, and in this context, consider the potential of social services for reducing territorial inequalities and the use of digitalisation to improve access to quality enabling services and employment services.

INVITES THE SOCIAL PROTECTION COMMITTEE AND THE EMPLOYMENT COMMITTEE, IN ACCORDANCE WITH THEIR RESPECTIVE COMPETENCES, TO

33. Consider the feasibility and the added value of improving the relevant EU social indicators, to support the Member States' efforts in identifying disadvantaged territories, improving access to quality enabling services and employment services as well as monitoring developments targeting disadvantaged territories, while taking into account existing indicators and data disaggregated by sex and age.
 34. Initiate and encourage, in cooperation with the Commission, knowledge sharing and exchanges of best practice between Member States, on a voluntary basis, as regards identifying, measuring and managing territorial inequalities including through local and place-based strategies and action plans based on high-quality data and evidence in order to support Member States in their national analytical efforts.
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References

EU interinstitutional

- European Pillar of Social Rights
<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1226&langId=en>

EU legislation

- Council Directive 2000/43/EC of 29 June 2000 implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin (OJ L 180/22, 19.7.2000, p. 22)
- Regulation (EU) 2021/1057 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 establishing the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1296/2013 (OJ L 231/21, 30.6.2021)

Council of the European Union

- Recommendation of 12 March 2021 on Roma equality, inclusion and participation (OJ C 93/1, 19.3.2021)
- Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 of 14 June 2021 establishing a European Child Guarantee (OJ L 223/14, 22.6.2021)
- Recommendation of 30 January 2023 on adequate minimum income ensuring active inclusion (OJ C 41/1, 3.2.2023)
- Recommendation of 27 November 2023 on developing social economy framework conditions (OJ C, C/2023/1344)
- Conclusions on measures to ensure equal access for Roma to adequate and desegregated housing, and to address segregated settlements (13517/23)

European Parliament

- European Parliament resolution of 5 October 2022 on the situation of Roma people living in settlements in the EU (2022/2662(RSP))

European Commission

- European Commission guidelines for planning and implementing national Roma strategic frameworks (COM(2020) 620 final)
- Ninth report on economic, social and territorial cohesion
https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/information-sources/cohesion-report_en
- Access to essential services: key challenges for the most vulnerable – report
https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&furtherNews=yes&newsId=10595&pk_source=newsletter&pk_medium=email&pk_campaign=eusocial_newsletter
- Territorial Agenda 2030 – A future for all places
https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/information/publications/brochures/2021/territorial-agenda-2030-a-future-for-all-places
- Communication on ‘Harnessing Talent in Europe’s regions’ (5252/23 + ADD1)

Committee of the Regions

- Opinion on Addressing Territorial Inequalities by Improving Access to Social Services
- Territorial impact assessment (TIA)
<https://cor.europa.eu/en/our-work/Pages/Territorial-Impact-Assessment.aspx>

Fundamental Rights Agency

- 2021 Roma survey
<https://fra.europa.eu/en/themes/roma>
- Equality in the EU 20 years on from the initial implementation of the equality directives
<https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2021/fra-opinion-eu-equality-20-years>
- Fundamental Rights Report 2024
<https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2024/fundamental-rights-report-2024>

Other

- Report of the High-Level Group on the future of social protection and of the welfare state in the EU

https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=88&eventsId=2057&furtherEvents=yes&pk_source=newsletter&pk_medium=email&pk_campaign=eusocial_newsletter