SUBSTANDARD ROMANI SETTLEMENTS ACROSS EUROPE:

ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM AND DISINVESTMENT



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Romalitico
ROMA POLICY ANALYSIS

GFOD
GLOBAL FORUM OF COMMUNITIES DISCRIMINATED ON WORK AND DESCENT

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Global Forum of Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (GFoD)

Global Forum of Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (GFoD) is the global coordination and engagement mechanism for the Stakeholder Group of Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (SG CDWD). Both were founded in 2021 and formally recognize the core motto of 'Leave No One Behind' propounded by Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which ensures Planet, Peace and Prosperity for all, especially those who are marginalized through generations and suffered social prejudices for life of dignity and peace.

https://www.globalforumcdwd.org/

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INTRODUCTION

Discrimination based on Work and Descent (DWD) affects more than 270 million people worldwide. Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (CDWD) can be found on all continents: Dalit communities in South Asia and Buraku in Japan, Roma communities in Europe, Haratin, Osu and other communities in West Africa and Quilombola or Palenque communities in Latin America. DWD is a unique type of discrimination that takes the form of social exclusion based on inherited status and ancestral occupation. DWD is often associated with notions of "purity and pollution" and practices of untouchability.[1] Consequently, CDWD are faced with harassment and violence on a daily basis and face extreme forms of discrimination in accessing employment, education, healthcare, housing, water and sanitation and other basic services. CDWD are often bound by bonded labour or modern/ancestral slavery practices.

Can you imagine someone who does not have the power to buy or rent a house in a preferred neighbourhood due to the social stigma based on their identity? These kinds of issues are faced by many vulnerable groups, especially CDWD identity-based groups. However, what makes the CDWD persons different is that they are not just unwelcome in such neighbourhoods, but also are forcefully made outcasts into living far away from the other communities in separate settlements.

Such practices exist because of the purity-pollution concept, due to which the CDWD is considered so impure that seeing them in the neighbourhood violates the purity profile and status of the other communities. Thus, the CDWD communities are segregated from living within the central part of the villages or centres of social relationships and communication. They must live in a secluded place outside the village/city centre. Many of the Roma communities throughout Europe are concentrated in suburban settlements (slums) with no essential services like water and sanitation. Similarly, the Quilombos are segregated to living

in the mountains far from the other territories, with limited access to critical services from the state.

Many African communities, including Osu of Nigeria, live in settlements reminiscent of concentration camps. Dalits in South Asia are segregated to settle down in the most vulnerable areas, such as unreachable hills by any proper road or transport facility or low-lying areas susceptible to drainage collection or water clogging in monsoon.[2]

A significant point is that spatial segregation is not limited to the physical separation of housing but also the social distancing of CDWDs from others, so much so that they are not even allowed to use the same roads as the other dominant and high-status population.

The ghettoization of Romani neighborhoods or the Roma slums have been the subject of various scholarly works in the last two decades. For example, Picker (2017) analysed the segregation of Roma in European cities and provided an account of several segregation mechanisms[3]; Vincze (2019) explored the formation of marginal urban housing areas for Roma as a result of dispossession[4]. In addition, there were also other studies conducted by non-Roma anthropologists for example, and these were mostly studies that "blamed the victim" for the situation such communities were in.

This report sheds light on one situation of Roma living in substandard Romani settlements (SRS), one of the most unacceptable forms of discrimination and exclusion of Roma communities across Europe. Substandard settlements can take different forms such as slums, shanty towns, ghettos, squats, dwellers, etc.

This report aims to illustrate some of the key challenges and living conduction in such sub substandard Roma settlements across Europe, and raise awareness on the slow violences of state disinvestment towards such communities.

What are SUBSTANDARD ROMANI SETTLEMENTS?

Many Roma communities across Europe live in conditions of extreme poverty and social marginalization. Alongside education, employment, and health care, housing and settlement issues are some of the most pressing concerns.[5]

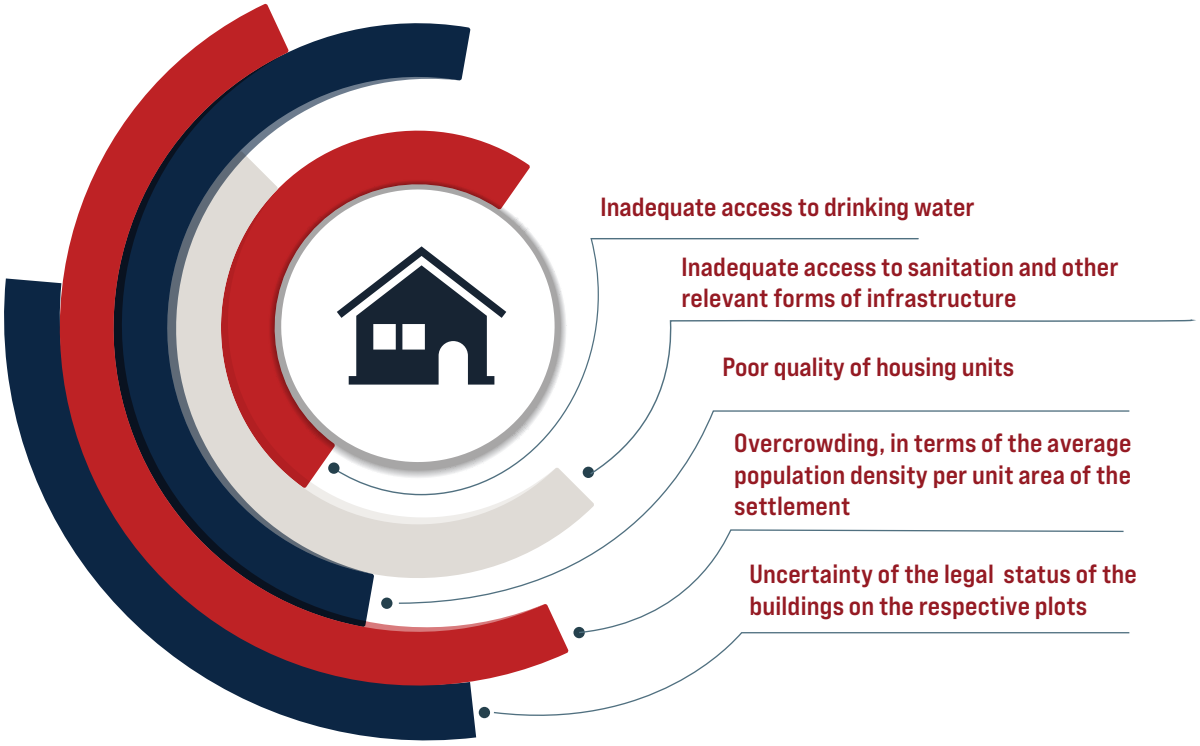
In 2022, a European Parliament report on the situation of Roma people living in settlements in the EU stressed "that access to decent desegregated housing is key to breaking the vicious circle of intergenerational poverty and social exclusion; notes that access to housing is a precondition for human dignity and is closely linked to the full enjoyment of human rights".[6]

Dallas in Cluj Napoca, Romania[7], Shanghai in Novi Sad Serbia[8], Mexico in Kicevo North Macedonia, they all represent an ironic label to denote many of the Roma inhabited SRS.

The case of France with the repatriation program of Sarkozy, when Romanian and Bulgarian Roma living in camps were given money to return to their countries, is well known. The evictions or expelling Roma from such settlements was considered by the French authorities as the solution to problems (mis) associated with these settlements such as prostitution, the exploitation of children for the purposes of begging, crime or illicit trafficking are the problems.

Today, French authorities are still using policies of dismantling of illegal settlements, with forced collective evictions of Roma families from their camps without any alternative accommodation being offered.

THE UNITED NATIONS[9] **DEFINITION OF SUBSTANDARD SETTLEMENTS** lists the following criteria as essential to their identification:



The United Nations definition of substandard settlements lists the following criteria as essential to their identification:

- Inadequate access to drinking water
- Inadequate access to sanitation and other relevant forms of infrastructure *(sewage network or septic tanks, traffic network, water supply network, and other communal services);*
- Poor quality of housing units *(housing units built using inadequate construction techniques and/or poor construction materials; also, housing units in disrepair due to poor maintenance, etc., which are potentially dangerous to the safety of residents);*
- Overcrowding, in terms of the average population density per unit area of the settlement, i.e., in terms of a large number of members per household;
- Uncertainty of the legal status of the buildings on the respective plots *(including unresolved property and legal relations over the buildings and/or the land of the settlement)*



Pata Rât (Cluj-Napoca, Romania), 2024, Photo Credits: Marco Pozzi

While such settlements do not represent the whole Roma communities, they do represent the most marginalized, excluded and impoverished.[10]

On the one hand, Roma activists, civil society organizations and community members/ inhabitants of those settlements "those becoming subjects" are advocating for significant policy changes, raising issues and concerns and advocating for their rights. Despite this, substandard neighborhoods create communities that are invisible to society and policy-makers.

On the other hand, it is the attention such settlements attract from the non-Roma population – especially when there are serious human rights[11] issues, or when there is an incidence of violence, theft, scandals. Life and death in the settlements seem to have no consequence on wider society, except when a large-scale tragedy happens, in which case a settlement becomes news for a short period of time. Media has an important role in portraying such neighborhoods, since many times it feeds into the policy agenda.

The so-called issue attention cycle shows that social problems that were once elevated to the rank of priority may sporadically recapture public interest, putting at the center the public's capacity to become bored or close their eyes when faced with uncomfortable situations that would require them to significantly alter their ways.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

Of Substandard Romani Settlements

SRS are generally located near urban areas, out of sight, in the proximity of environmentally hazardous environments, degrading environments or in a stage of urban decay. Here, residents mostly rely on scavenged resources, such as metal, paper, and plastic, as well as other discarded items such as clothes, shoes, furniture, and home appliances.

Given the high level of poverty in such settlements, many times these are either used personally or sold at informal markets. In some cases, even discarded food is collected and consumed by the residents.

The dwellings in SRS are constructed from discarded materials such as cardboard, plywood, and wooden boards. These settlements are continuously threatened by forced removals, as has occurred in the past.

Although a few settlements have some brick dwellings, most people construct their houses from waste materials, as investing in more permanent solutions is impractical due to the unstable nature of SRS. SRS are not connected to the public power grid and the lifesaving electricity is being denied to the residents by the state. When the electricity is out, people are forced to use candles, which have proven on many occasions to be a cause of fires[12], electrocution[13] and, consequently, the death of SRS residents.

Residents mostly make a living by collecting discarded materials, such as paper, plastic or metal.

Subtle symbols of status are horse carriages or poor quality cars, watches and phones. Then, this pushes this population into a new living space, a new profession, giving them a new identity as “settlement dwellers” and a “trash picker”.

Collecting trash means being constantly surrounded by it. It means sleeping next to it, breathing it in and consuming it. Trash attracts rats, digging underground or simply chewing through cardboard, wood or metal. Or even cause bodily harm or even death to the residents.

In order to access any of the public services, to which all citizens are entitled to, one is required to possess proper documentation. The birth certificate is, perhaps, the most important of all, as based on it, citizens can receive other documents such as national identity cards or health care cards. In order to have a birth certificate, one’s birth needs to be registered by one or both parents.

The issue many Roma living in SRS are facing is that in order to register your child’s birth, you need to have documents of your own, which they seldom do.

Thus, the enchanted circle continues. Without the necessary documentation, a person is unable to register at the employment office, access health care, have a legal job or open a bank account. Children wear clothes that do not fit or are dirty, many do not attend school, or if they do, they do so in a segregated school, or without prospects of completing secondary education. In the long run, the state’s (in)action allows the racialized settlement residents to die, to enter into a stage of gradual degeneration, social death and lose their humanity.

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HOW DO SRS LOOK LIKE AND WHAT IS HAPPENING INSIDE?

In Romania, data from 2014[14] and 2016 (from the World Bank)[15] establish the key context and the general overview of the marginalized communities across the country, especially on the socio-territorial marginalization of Roma communities.

In Romania, the cases from Baia Mare of Craica[16], Ferentari from Bucharest[17] are quite known, yet the most well-known is the Pat Rat case which has about 2000 inhabitants, 70% of them Roma. Known as one of the most serious cases of environmental racism across Europe, the Roma living here were temporarily located next to the waste dump of Cluj Napoca city. In 2010, the local authorities of Cluj-Napoca forcibly evicted about 300 people – mostly Roma – from Coastei Street in the centre of the city. Since then, most of them have been living on the furthest outskirts of Cluj-Napoca, close to a landfill and a chemical waste dump in an area known as Pata Rât, where they were moved by the municipality.[18]

Since then only about 10% of the population has been relocated. Such settlements do not have basic infrastructure, people live in inadequate dwellings, the dwellings are not legalized, there is no basic infrastructure, people mostly have an unregulated civil status, a polluted environment is developing which additionally negatively affects health and contributes to a reduced life expectancy of the Roma community.[19] Perhaps the most obvious cause of death of the residents are infections.[20]

As stated previously, unsanitary living conditions and the abject nature of a trash picker's work affect their health. Protective equipment is unaffordable and access to health care is incessantly out of reach. Settlement residents have to rely on over-the-counter medication, which are, in most cases, limited to painkillers. Pain caused by difficult work and skeletal deformities is part of the residents' lived experiences. Living with pain became normalized in the settlement, even proof that a person is a hard worker.

The role of the local authorities in perpetuating the precarity and dispossession of the settlement residents is observed, with a focus on failed relocation attempts.[21] The challenge of achieving sustainable urban development for substandard settlements in North Macedonia has persisted for over 20 years. This long-standing issue has led to the significant exclusion of a portion of the Roma community from social and economic opportunities. Due to the lack of urbanization in these



The role of the local authorities in perpetuating the precarity and dispossession of the settlement residents is observed, with a focus on failed relocation attempts.

Photo Source: Romano Godi, Turkey (2023)

settlements, residents endure inadequate housing, lack of basic infrastructure, unlegalized dwellings, unregulated civil status, and a polluted environment. These conditions negatively impact health and contribute to reduced life expectancy, rendering these communities invisible to broader society.

air pollution and illegal dumping. Instead of addressing these issues comprehensively, city authorities frequently resort to writing fines or forcibly demolishing these communities. Efforts to address these issues have been undertaken by various organizations[22], with a notable initiative being the EU's thematic support for Social Mapping of Roma, conducted in 2019.

In the Republic of North Macedonia, substandard settlements are prevalent in nearly every city. The Shadow Report on the implementation of the Roma Strategy identifies 15 settlements, with over 5 located in the City of Skopje, specifically in the municipalities of Gazi Baba, Karposh, Gjorce Petrov, Chair, and Shuto Orizari.

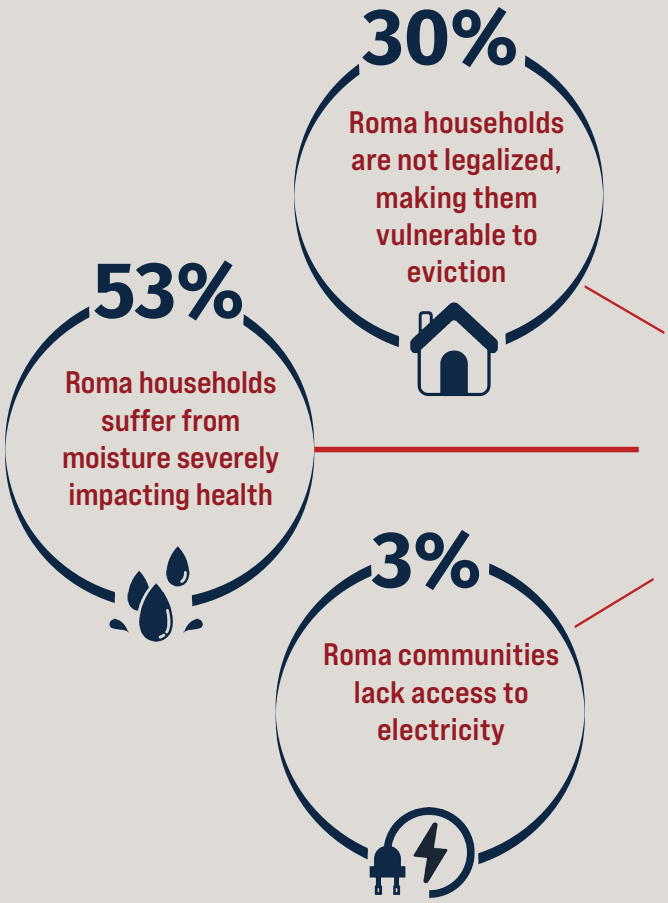
These settlements, including Qeramidnica, Brsjačka Buna, Kvantashki Pazar, Zlokućani, Topansko Pole, and Luka Gerov, have become integral parts of these municipalities over the years, often recognized by the telltale sign that they begin "where the asphalt ends." In recent years, these substandard settlements have gained attention, often due to public outcry over

This mapping provided a comprehensive overview of the situation and structure of Roma settlements across 14 municipalities, highlighting the socio-economic status and living conditions of the Roma population.

According to the social mapping report[23], about 30% of households in these municipalities are not

Social Mapping of Roma, 2019

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legalized, making them vulnerable to eviction. The report further revealed that 53% of Roma households suffer from moisture in their dwellings, which severely impacts the health of residents, particularly children, by affecting the respiratory system.

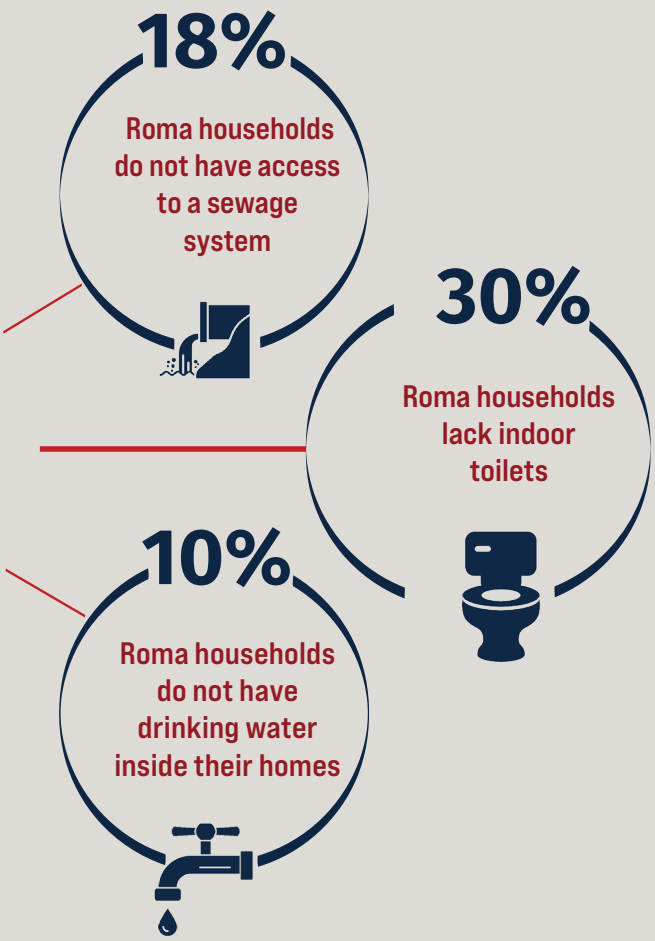
Access to electricity is another crucial indicator of housing quality, with only 3% of Roma communities lacking electricity. The report also showed that 18% of households do not have access to a sewage system, 30% lack indoor toilets, 20% do not have toilets with bathrooms, and around 10% do not have drinking water inside their homes.

In many of these settlements residents mostly make a living by collecting discarded materials, such as paper, plastic or metal. Data from 2023 shows that in terms of their activity the largest number of the community deals with the collection of plastic and secondary raw materials, followed by trade, public communal hygiene, as well as transport and construction.

The Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, as the initiator and signatory of the Poznan Declaration with partners from the Western Balkans for the integration of Roma within



Photo Source: Colectif - Vardariste, North Macedonia



the EU enlargement process, has committed to implementing policies in six key areas, including housing. In this context, the Declaration stipulates that countries should "whenever possible, legalize all informal settlements where Roma live; or provide permanent, decent, affordable, and desegregated housing for Roma currently living in informal settlements that cannot be legalized for justifiable reasons."

The Macedonian Strategy for Roma Inclusion 2022-2030 further emphasizes this commitment, with one of its specific goals being the urbanization of Roma settlements within local self-government units. This includes two specific objectives: mapping the current situation regarding legalization and supporting the urbanization process of these settlements.

Besides urbanization, the strategy places special emphasis on legalization, communal infrastructure, and reducing exposure to pollution and contamination in Roma communities.

Furthermore, in accordance with the Strategy, National Action Plans for the period 2022-2025 have been

developed, transferring a significant portion of housing-related activities to the municipalities. These plans aim to ensure that local governments play an active role in improving housing conditions for Roma, reinforcing the national strategy's goals at a community level. This holistic approach underscores the government's dedication to addressing the multifaceted housing needs of Roma communities, thereby promoting their overall integration and well-being.

A recent report from Romani Godi shows that there are about 12 neighborhoods just in **Turkey.**[24] Following the urban transformations in Romani neighborhoods in Istanbul, Romani people are gradually being pushed towards the outskirts of the city, slowly moving away from the urban center. For example, the urban transformation, which began in the Küçükbakkalköy Romani neighborhoods in Istanbul in 2006, has been an attempt to distance Romas from the neighborhoods they have been living in for many years. Particularly those who left Küçükbakkalköy have started to move towards the farthest points of the Anatolian side of Istanbul to establish tent cities. Romani families settling in areas such as Alemdağ Nişantepe Mahallesi, Alemdağ Paşaköy, and Ömerli began to create their own living spaces there. When they first settled, these neighborhoods lacked basic necessities such as electricity, water, and sanitation, and living spaces were very cramped. Over time, the Roma in these neighborhoods began to build their own living spaces and formed extensive Roma neighborhoods.
Nişantepe and Paşaköy neighborhoods, which are about a ten-minute walk from the main highway, are divided by the highway. Nişantepe Mahallesi, with the considerable development of the region (such as the arrival of a university and the construction of luxury apartments, etc.), has once again come under the risk of urban transformation.

However, there has been little development in the Paşaköy neighborhood, and it continues to remain as an invisible neighborhood in the region. Despite the awareness of public institutions (which can be understood from visits during elections or occasional

aid deliveries), no steps have been taken for the development of this neighborhood or access to basic services. Looking at the living conditions, especially the vulnerable and makeshift tent structures stand out. Additionally, these tent structures continue to rely on portable electricity and water supplies. Apart from two small grocery stores in the neighborhood, there are no other shops to meet the basic needs of the residents.

Furthermore, after the urban transformation of Küçükbakkalköy, there are areas where families who migrated to Dudullu have collectively set up regional tent camps. Again, these tent structures have access to portable electricity and water. It is observed that the environmental cleanliness of the barracks or tents in these areas is inadequate, the roofs are made with very thin structures, and the walls and doors are in need of repair. All these areas are seen as not suitable for possible rain, snow, and winter conditions, and they are vulnerable to possible disasters such as floods and fires.

In Turkey, the criminalization of these settlements is quite prominent. A recent study explored the association of Roma neighborhoods with criminal activity by law enforcement agencies and the negative perception of Roma identity as a representation of danger and criminality.[25] Roma are seen as subjects of crime and accused of theft and that Roma neighborhoods are frequently subjected to police raids.

According to Weizman (2004) such "settlements could be seen as optical devices for surveillance and the exercise of power".[26]

Policing of SRS shifts the attention away from the slow violences of state disinvestment, training the gaze onto the "moral failings' ' of Roma inhabitant of such settlements. Dispossessing those who are already dispossessed by the slow violences of the state (either through urban policies of segregation, disinvestment, gentrification), criminalization is experienced as a cumulative racialized violence of dehumanization.

In **Serbia**, according to Jaksic and Basic[27], there were 593 Romani settlements in the early 2000's. These settlements range from being 15 or 20 years old to being around 120 years old. In fact, 47.3% of settlements have been established in the early 20th century. About 53% of all settlements in Serbia are located in a city or a town, the rest are in rural areas and the sizes vary – from 100 people to more than 5000. Out of the 593, 43.5% are considered substandard.

The Serbian Government, in cooperation with the UN Human Rights Unit, conducted a mapping project[28] in the period March – September 2020 and found that there are 702 SRSs with 1,67,975 residents. This shows a significant increase in the number of SRSs in the period of 15 years. As expected, Belgrade is the city with the most SRSs – 122 settlements with 43,944 residents. Other major cities in Serbia were mapped as follows: Leskovac, 14 settlements with 11,830



Dispossessing those who are already dispossessed by the slow violences of the state, criminalization is experienced as a cumulative racialized violence of dehumanization.

Photo Source: Romano Godi, Turkey (2023)

residents; Nis, 13 settlements with 8,409 residents; and Novi Sad, 6 settlements with 3,783 residents. This leads to the conclusion that the number of SRSs is increasing - around 18% increase in the last 20 years.

The Serbian Government is acutely aware of the issues pertaining to life in the SRSs. The goals of the Poznan Declaration[29] from 2019, which was signed by the Serbian Government, related to housing states: "To legalise all settlements where Roma live wherever possible; To provide permanent, decent, affordable and desegregated housing for Roma living in substandard settlements that cannot be legalised for justified reasons."

Furthermore, in the Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma in the Republic of Serbia 2022–2030[30], which was adopted by the Serbian Government in February 2022, in the Housing section it is declared that: "There is a significant difference between the housing conditions of Roma and the general population." [31]

According to the same document 32% SRS have no access to the power grid, 38% have no access to running water and 65% are not connected to a sewage network.

As was mentioned before, in 2020 a mapping project was conducted and it showed a significant increase in the number of SRSs compared to the data from the previous iteration of the Strategy for the period of 2016 – 2025[32,] where 583 SRSs were mapped. While there is some difference compared to the numbers Jaksic and Basic provide, in both cases, statistics show an increase in the number of settlements. Furthermore, similar objectives can be observed in both iterations of the Strategy, leading to the conclusion that they never transitioned from strategy to policy.

THE GOALS OF THE POZNAN DECLARATION FROM 2019, WHICH WAS SIGNED BY THE SERBIAN GOVERNMENT, RELATED TO HOUSING STATES:

"To legalise all settlements where Roma live wherever possible; To provide permanent, decent, affordable and desegregated housing for Roma living in substandard settlements that cannot be legalised for justified reasons."

Substandard Roman Settlements in SERBIA

- **Serbia***
  702 **1,67,975** residents
- **Belgrade**
  122 **43,944** residents
- **Leskovac**
  14 **11,830** residents
- **Nis**
  13 **8,409** residents
- **Novi Sad**
  6 **3,783** residents

18% increase in SRS in Serbia over 20 years



32% SRS have no access to the power grid

38% SRS have no access to running water

65% SRS are not connected to a sewage network.

* Findings from the mapping project conducted in the period March – September 2020 by the Serbian Government, in cooperation with the UN Human Rights Unit.

CONCLUSION

In the disinvested settlement inhumane living conditions and lack of public services are part of preparing and creating the conditions for real estate development in the Roma neighborhoods.

The land SRS are built on is, in most cases, public land, belonging to the local government. This land is usually chosen by its residents because it is abandoned or simply not utilized, as well as for its proximity to resources – namely trash. However, when the land becomes interesting to an investor, local governments will forcefully remove its residents and let the investor build a block of residential and business spaces.

Unless the land where SRS are placed becomes economically interesting to an investor, the authorities do not intervene. In membe's understanding The state exerts its sovereignty, and perpetuates the precarity of the settlement through force removal and dispossession of Roma communities's belongings, their human rights and their livelihood.

As non-Roma neighborhoods have transformed, SRS have remained in place, "grounded" in disinvestment. Substandard Romani settlements are "zones of social abandonment".

Many of such settlements are part of the city and the officials are well aware of the conditions people living there are in. Examples of mapping of such communities, as exemplified above - done either by NGOs, the government itself or other international organizations - from Serbia, Slovakia, Romania, Macedonia, Turkey, but not only - show that despite the acknowledgment of the existence of such settlements, little has been done to address the situation of Roma communities living in such spaces.

As Davis noted, “the idea of an interventionist state strongly committed to social housing and job development seems either a hallucination or a bad joke, because governments long ago abdicated any serious effort to combat slums and redress urban marginality“ (Davis, 2006, p. 37).

While substandard Romani settlements are part of the administrative jurisdiction and the officials are well aware of the conditions Roma living there are in (i.e., available data tools such as the Atlas of Marginalized Roma Communities in Slovakia), the authorities do not intervene, except when a large-scale tragedy happens, in which case a settlement becomes news for a short period of time.

Substandard urbanization as a phenomenon in cities largely determines the socioeconomic position of the Roma communities living in those settlements. Hence, economic activity, environment, health status, civil status, and education are mutually dependent on the development and urbanization level of the settlement and influence in the direction of widening the gap and inequality with other communities from other settlements. The issue of housing is closely related to other areas such as health, personal documentation, education, and employment. Therefore, interventions in the housing sector can have beneficial impacts across all these areas. It is crucial to take a holistic approach to ensure that housing solutions contribute to the overall improvement of living conditions for the Roma and other vulnerable populations.

These settlements are invisible to the local and central government, where the population has been left for more than 10-20 years to fend for themselves and survive without any support. Although policies and programs are created in other municipalities, infrastructure projects are implemented, typical houses are built, the municipalities that are in the immediate vicinity of the settlements do not take any actions in terms of creating public policies.

RECOMMENDATION

- We call upon European governments to address the problem on a centralised, national level while working in close cooperation with local and regional authorities through the implementation of housing-related policies, including social housing and innovative policies

- We call upon European governments to implement the concept of ‘adequate housing’ for all, including Roma people, as defined by the UN

- We underscore the urgent need for comprehensive and sustainable solutions to improve the living conditions in Roma settlements. Addressing these basic infrastructure deficits is essential not only for enhancing the quality of life but also for integrating these communities into the social and economic fabric of the specific countries.

- We call upon relevant authorities to facilitate the legalization of informal dwellings, improve infrastructure, and address environmental health issues, ensuring Roma can access various basic human rights and services

- We call upon European governments to build social housing for vulnerable populations, construct housing units for Roma, and develop communal infrastructure such as asphalting roads, installing water supply systems, creating sewage systems, and improving electricity supply.

- We call upon relevant authorities to adopt and/or amend the Law on Social Housing, incorporating Roma neighborhoods into the general urbanistic plans, and providing support for building social infrastructure.

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Global Forum of Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (GFoD)

Discrimination based on Work and Descent (DWD) is the UN terminology used for communities who are traditionally and intergenerationally discriminated based on their identity, social-hierarchical positions, the work associated with their positions, and their lineage and descendants.

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