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The 2026 European Semester: An Analysis of the Assessment of Bulgaria and the Situation of Roma

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Introduction

On 3 June 2026, the European Commission published the **2026 Country Report – Bulgaria** ([Commission Staff Working Document, SWD\(2026\) 202 final](#)), assessing Bulgaria's economic, social, employment and structural developments and identifying the country's main challenges in the framework of the European Semester. The report addresses poverty, social exclusion, education, employment, healthcare, housing and access to services, and provides specific data on Roma in several areas.

This analysis examines how the situation of Roma is reflected in the 2026 Country Report and in the subsequent **Council Recommendation of 10 July 2026 on the economic, social, employment, structural and budgetary policies of Bulgaria** ([C/2026/3915](#)).

A quantitative analysis conducted by Kamen Makaveev found that the Roma community is mentioned **53 times in the Country Report and 5 times in the Council Recommendation**. This difference points to a significant gap between the visibility of Roma in the analysis of Bulgaria's socio-economic situation and the extent to which the specific challenges faced by Roma communities are reflected in the subsequent policy recommendations.

Integro Association recognises that the data presented by the European Commission and European agencies provide an important basis for assessing the situation. **At the same time, quantitative descriptions of inequalities are not sufficient unless they are complemented by an analysis of the mechanisms through which those inequalities are produced and reproduced.** These include antigypsyism and discrimination, spatial segregation, housing insecurity, the multidimensional nature of poverty, and the meaningful participation of Roma communities and civil society in policy development and implementation.

Note on statistical data

This analysis uses indicators presented in different parts of the 2026 Country Report – Bulgaria, as well as data from sources cited in the report, including the FRA Roma Survey 2024. The indicators may refer to different reference years, age groups, samples and methodologies. Therefore, **differences between individual percentages should not automatically be interpreted as contradictions.**

For example, the Country Report gives an at-risk-of-poverty-or-social-exclusion rate of **77.8% for Roma in 2025**, while the final Council Recommendation gives **78.3%**. Both figures accurately reproduce the respective documents and should be interpreted in the context of their specific source.

1. Key findings on the situation of Roma

The Country Report identifies significant socio-economic inequalities affecting Roma.

In relation to the labour market, the report states that **employment among Roma aged 20–64 increased from 47% in 2021 to 62% in 2024**. Despite this substantial improvement, it remained almost 15 percentage points below the national employment rate. Nearly one in two Roma aged 16–24 were NEET – not in employment, education or training.

The risk of poverty or social exclusion remains exceptionally high. The Country Report gives a rate of **77.8% for Roma in 2025**.

Educational inequalities are particularly pronounced. The share of Roma children attending segregated education **increased from 64% in 2021 to 70% in 2024**. In 2024, **55% of Roma aged 18–24 had left education or training prematurely**, while only **42% of Roma aged 20–24 had completed at least upper-secondary education**, compared with 90% of the general population. Only **3% of Roma aged 30–34 had attained tertiary education**.

Participation in early childhood education and care also remains lower among disadvantaged groups, including Roma children. The Country Report notes that Roma enrolment increased to 68% in 2024, but significant gaps in access and quality remain.

In healthcare, the Country Report states that **40% of Roma report not being covered by the national health insurance scheme or additional insurance schemes, while 6% report unmet medical needs**.

Housing conditions also reveal significant deprivation. According to the Country Report, drawing on the FRA Roma Survey 2024, **57% of Roma in Bulgaria lived in unsuitable accommodation in 2024, while 79% lived in overcrowded dwellings**. Around one third did not have a flushing toilet, shower or bathroom available inside their dwelling, and almost one fifth lived without water supply. **Between 2019 and 2024, 2% of Roma in Bulgaria were forced to leave their housing because of eviction or distraint**.

These indicators demonstrate the scale of inequality. **The central question of this analysis, however, is not only what the outcomes are, but why these inequalities continue to be reproduced.**

2. Antigypsyism¹ and discrimination as structural factors

One of the significant gaps in the Country Report is that **antigypsyism and discrimination are not examined in sufficient depth as structural factors contributing to the persistence and reproduction of inequality.**

The report presents outcomes – lower educational attainment, lower employment, high poverty and barriers to services. Less attention is given to the role of discrimination in access to education, employment, housing, healthcare and public services.

This is particularly relevant in the context of European Roma policy. The European Commission explicitly identifies antigypsyism as a specific form of racism and stresses the need to address it as a factor contributing to persistent Roma exclusion. The 2020–2030 framework places equality, social and economic inclusion, and participation at the centre of EU Roma policy.

FRA data show that **19% of Roma and Travellers surveyed in Bulgaria reported discrimination because of their ethnic origin.** The corresponding figure for discrimination when looking for work was **26%**, while **27% reported discrimination when looking for housing.**

Discrimination should therefore not be understood solely as a collection of individual incidents. **It can affect Roma people's access to fundamental rights, services and economic opportunities and thereby contribute to the reproduction of social exclusion.**

3. Spatial segregation and territorial isolation

The Country Report addresses educational segregation and related inequalities, but **spatial segregation and territorial isolation of Roma communities are not analysed as a sufficiently developed structural issue in their own right.**

In a number of settlements, Roma communities live in neighbourhoods characterised by inadequate infrastructure and limited access to transport, services and economic opportunities. These conditions can deepen existing inequalities in education, healthcare and employment.

The interaction between spatial and educational segregation is particularly significant: **70% of Roma children in Bulgaria covered by the FRA Survey 2024 attend segregated education.**

Segregation should therefore not be treated solely as a housing or education issue. **It is closely linked to equal access to rights, services and opportunities for full participation in social and economic life.**

4. Housing insecurity

¹ **Antigypsyism** – a specific form of racism and discrimination directed against Roma, comparable in nature to antisemitism.

The Country Report provides important data on housing conditions, but **housing insecurity has dimensions that go beyond the quality of the housing stock and the availability of infrastructure.**

Security of tenure, the legal status of housing, access to address registration, access to social housing and the risk of forced eviction are also relevant.

The Country Report shows that in 2024 **57% of Roma lived in unsuitable accommodation, 79% lived in overcrowded dwellings, and one third did not have a flushing toilet, shower or bathroom available inside their dwelling.** Almost one fifth lived without water supply.

FRA also reports **27% discrimination against Roma when looking for housing in Bulgaria.**

These conditions can restrict access to education, social services, healthcare and employment. Housing policy concerning Roma communities should therefore also be considered part of social inclusion policy and equal access to rights.

5. Poverty as a multidimensional problem

The Country Report correctly identifies the exceptionally high risk of poverty or social exclusion among Roma. **The 77.8% rate recorded for 2025 illustrates the scale of the problem.**

From the perspective of Integro Association, however, **poverty among Roma communities should not be understood solely in terms of insufficient income.**

It may involve the simultaneous accumulation of low income, low educational attainment, unemployment or insecure employment, inadequate housing, limited access to healthcare and social services, territorial isolation and limited opportunities for participation.

These factors accumulate and reinforce one another. Therefore, **effective poverty-reduction policies need to address not only income, but also access to rights, services, education, employment and opportunities for development.**

The Country Report itself notes that poverty and social exclusion are associated with a combination of factors, including the limited poverty-reducing effect of social transfers and unequal access to quality education, healthcare and social services.

6. Roma children and early childhood development

Roma children are exposed to **multiple and interconnected risks** – poverty, insufficient participation in early childhood education and care, segregation, low educational attainment and early school leaving.

The Country Report states that **55% of Roma aged 18–24 had left education or training prematurely**, while the share of Roma children attending segregated education reached 70%. Only 42% of Roma aged 20–24 had completed at least upper-secondary education.

These factors should be addressed as interconnected challenges rather than as isolated problems.

Particular attention is needed to early childhood development, access to services for children and families, support for parents, and the prevention of family separation caused by poverty and the lack of adequate support.

This approach is consistent with the logic of the European Child Guarantee and broader European policies addressing child poverty and social exclusion.

7. Roma women

The situation of Roma women deserves greater visibility in policies addressing Roma inclusion.

FRA data for the countries covered by the survey show a significant gender gap in employment: **38% of Roma women were in paid work compared with 69% of Roma men**. These figures are not specific to Bulgaria, but they demonstrate the importance of a gender dimension in Roma inclusion policies.

Roma women may simultaneously face barriers related to education, employment, care responsibilities, poverty, discrimination and access to healthcare.

Roma inclusion policies should therefore include **measures aimed at the economic and social empowerment of Roma women**, alongside measures addressing education, employment and access to services.

8. Effectiveness and accessibility of the social protection system

The Country Report notes that **the poverty-reducing impact of social transfers remains limited**, while the adequacy of minimum income support is under pressure from the cost of essential goods. The report also identifies uneven access to social and healthcare services, particularly in rural areas.

For Roma households, these limitations may overlap with other barriers – low employment, low educational attainment, housing insecurity and territorial isolation.

Therefore, **the social protection system should not be assessed only by the amount of financial support provided, but also by its ability to reach people in need, combine services and create genuine pathways out of poverty.**

9. Participation of Roma civil society

Effective policies for Roma equality, inclusion and participation require **meaningful participation by Roma communities and Roma civil society organisations**.

The European Commission identifies participation as one of the three horizontal pillars of the EU Roma strategic framework, alongside equality and social and economic inclusion. The framework stresses the need for Roma and civil society participation in policy development, implementation and monitoring.

From the perspective of Integro Association, **the participation of Roma civil society in the preparation of the 2026 Country Report was not sufficiently visible or structured**. This does not imply that no other forms of consultation took place; rather, the role and contribution of Roma organisations are not sufficiently identifiable in the final document.

More structured, transparent and consistent dialogue with Roma organisations could contribute to a more complete assessment of the barriers faced by Roma communities.

Participation should not be reduced to formal consultation, but should provide a genuine opportunity to contribute to policy development, implementation and monitoring.

10. Assessment of the implementation of national Roma policies

The Country Report contains data on individual areas relevant to Roma inclusion, including education, employment and housing. At the same time, **it does not provide a sufficiently systematic assessment of the implementation and impact of national Roma policies as a whole**.

It is necessary to assess not only the measures adopted, but also their effectiveness, the resources allocated to them, the results achieved and the reasons for insufficient progress.

The EU Roma strategic framework provides for Member States to report on the implementation of their national Roma strategic frameworks and to use monitoring and evaluation indicators.

Therefore, **the existence of a strategy or action plan cannot in itself be considered evidence of effectiveness**. What matters is measurable progress and actual change in people's lives.

11. Demographic context and future labour potential

The Country Report identifies **the shrinking workforce and adverse demographic trends as major structural challenges for Bulgaria**. In this context, education and successful labour-market integration of young people are important not only for social policy, but also for the country's future economic potential.

For Roma communities, this means that investment in the education, health, skills and labour-market participation of children and young people should be understood not only as a social inclusion measure, but also as **an investment in Bulgaria's future human capital**.

Assessment of the Council Recommendation

The final **Council Recommendation of 10 July 2026** was published in the Official Journal of the European Union on **1 September 2026** as C/2026/3915.

The Recommendation covers areas directly relevant to the situation of Roma – the quality and inclusiveness of education, employment of underrepresented groups, skills, adult learning, social inclusion, integrated employment and social services, and access to healthcare. It explicitly refers to the need to increase employment among vulnerable groups, including Roma.

At the same time, **Roma are not identified as a separate target group in the operative recommendation**, although they are explicitly mentioned in the accompanying reasoning. The Council Recommendation notes, for example, that NEET rates among young Roma remain as high as 46% and that the AROPE rate for Roma is 78.3%.

This distinction is important. On the one hand, mainstreaming Roma inclusion across general policies is necessary. On the other, **mainstreaming should not result in the loss of visibility of the specific barriers faced by Roma communities**.

Roma face interconnected forms of exclusion – poverty, educational and spatial segregation, discrimination, housing insecurity and limited access to services. Universal measures therefore need to be complemented by **targeted actions capable of reaching people facing multiple and overlapping barriers**.

A lack of sufficient specificity may also make monitoring more difficult. The implementation of a general measure may be reported as successful without clearly establishing whether it has resulted in an improvement in the situation of Roma communities.

This creates a **disconnect between the analytical visibility of Roma in the Country Report and the extent to which their specific challenges are translated into clearly identifiable and measurable policy priorities**.

Main strategic gaps

The analysis identifies three main strategic gaps:

- 1. Insufficiently developed analysis of antigypsyism and discrimination as structural factors contributing to the reproduction of inequality.**
- 2. Insufficient attention to spatial segregation, territorial isolation and housing insecurity as interconnected challenges.**

3. Insufficiently consistent application of a multidimensional approach to poverty and social exclusion, including through integrated and participatory solutions.

These factors do not operate in isolation. They accumulate and reinforce one another, helping explain why some inequalities persist despite policies and investments already in place.

Conclusion

The 2026 Country Report – Bulgaria contains substantial data on the situation of Roma and clearly demonstrates serious inequalities in poverty, education, employment, healthcare and housing.

The main limitation identified by this analysis is that the quantitative description of outcomes is not consistently complemented by a sufficiently developed analysis of the structural mechanisms that reproduce those inequalities.

Greater attention should be given to antigypsyism and discrimination, spatial segregation, housing insecurity and the multidimensional nature of poverty. The participation of Roma communities and Roma civil society organisations in policy development, implementation and monitoring should also be strengthened.

At the same time, a clear link is needed between the analysis of the situation and the resulting policy recommendations.

When Roma are among the groups most severely affected by poverty and social exclusion, their specific needs should be visible not only in the diagnosis of problems, but also in policy priorities, measures, resources and mechanisms for monitoring results.

Sources

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2. European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), Rights of Roma and Travellers in 13 European countries – Perspectives from the Roma Survey 2024, 2025.

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3. European Commission, A Union of Equality: EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation, COM(2020) 620 final.

Used in the analysis of antigypsyism, equality, inclusion, participation and monitoring of Roma policies.

4. Council Recommendation of 10 July 2026 on the economic, social, employment, structural and budgetary policies of Bulgaria, C/2026/3915.

Main source for the analysis of the policy recommendations addressed to Bulgaria.

5. European Commission, European Child Guarantee.

Used in relation to early childhood development, child poverty and access to services for children and families.

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