



Ombudsman of the Republic of Latvia

The Situation of Roma in Latvia

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Summary

The study “The Situation of Roma in Latvia”¹ explores the experience and observations of seven municipalities of the Republic of Latvia - Daugavpils City Municipality, Jelgava City Municipality, Jūrmala City Municipality, Riga City Municipality, Talsi Municipal Government, Tukums Municipal Government and Ventspils City Municipality – in supporting Roma in the following areas:

- cooperation with the Roma community;
- education of Roma children;
- housing support;
- support for the provision of social assistance.

The greatest differences between municipalities were observed **in the level of cooperation** with Roma/ NGOs representing Roma. One of the municipal governments includes Roma NGOs in their commissions, taking into account their views. Additionally, a Roma mediator is available at the municipal government, and the school employs a Roma teaching assistant. On the other hand, other municipalities are actively trying to motivate Roma to form their own NGOs, but ultimately leave the choice up to Roma themselves. It is necessary to point out that the municipalities where the services of Roma mediators have been made available, view it as a positive initiative. Roma mediators themselves have recognised that such mediation service between Roma and state and municipal institutions is necessary.

In the field of education, it is necessary to pay close attention to Roma children already from pre-school age, in order to ensure a successful start to the schooling process. Special attention should be paid to the number of Roma children in special education institutions.

¹ The full text of the study is available here:

https://www.tiesibsargs.lv/uploads/content/publikacijas/romu_situacija_latvija_2022_1648646871.pdf

With regard to a resolution of social issues, including the provision of housing support, it should be noted that local governments do not keep statistics on the ethnic origin of residents, therefore social assistance and housing support are allocated to Roma on an equal basis with others.

It is therefore necessary to highlight the positive and negative aspects related to **housing issues**. The following issues have been highlighted by the municipalities: inadequate living conditions in Roma dwellings, violations of the internal rules of municipal residential houses by Roma (as tenants); failure to ensure the maintenance of the residential premises rented out by the municipality; limited ability to ensure a proper exploitation and routine repairs of the residential premises; inappropriate behaviour (often, stealing) by Roma, and a lack of motivation and cooperation in solving their problems, or a lack of knowledge of the official language.

According to the local governments, the main problem is the lack of discipline when it comes to housing-related payments, which leads to debt. Since local governments are not interested in the debt accumulation process, they have set up various mechanisms to motivate serial debtors to pay in a timely manner, for example, by using short-term rental contracts and providing regular reminders of utility payments. Roma mediators can provide valuable support to local governments in addressing the problem of late utility payments.

For the most part, there are no cases of eviction.

Both local governments and the State Employment Agency point to the same trends in the **employment** of Roma, i.e. Roma mostly get involved in temporary paid social work organised by the local governments, and Roma apply for lower-paid jobs. Both local governments and the State Employment Agency highlight the following obstacles to employment: low levels of education (including low written language skills, a lack of digital skills); low self-motivation (for personal development and work); widespread stereotypes about Roma among employers, preventing them from entering into an employment relationship. It is important to emphasise that of all the nationalities indicated by the State Employment Agency, Roma have the shortest average duration of unemployment. Overall, in order to avoid the development of a new low-educated generation, it is necessary to pay special attention to the education of Roma children.

In the field of social assistance, most local governments indicate that Roma mostly seek social assistance on their own, and assistance is usually sought by the same persons (families) who are already known to social services and whose situation tends to remain the same regardless. However, there are also cases when assistance is provided to persons either as a result of an apartment inspection, discovering that the living conditions are inadequate, or by responding to information provided by other persons and the responsible institutions.

The Social Service provides support in drawing up necessary documents and promoting cooperation with sworn bailiffs. However, invaluable social assistance is provided not only by the staff of the Social Service, but also by other departments of the local government, which have developed good cooperation with Roma, Roma mediators, who ensure and promote dialogue between Roma and the responsible institutions, and teachers/teaching assistants of specific schools.

Although it can be concluded that the majority of Roma people are aware and know where to turn for social assistance, most local governments have indicated that most Roma are not able to read, write and therefore prepare a submission to apply for social assistance. This has raised the issue of the **number of illiterate** Roma and the measures to promote adult education in municipalities, regarding which most local governments had no information or provided no information, with some local governments referring only to Latvian language or naturalisation courses or educational opportunities at the evening school and the State Employment Agency. It is apparent that the issue of adult Roma education is either not being sufficiently addressed or is not addressed due to a lack of interest and active involvement of the Roma themselves (such courses have been organised and individual approach has been provided but they have not become sustainable in the long term).

The impact of COVID-19. First, it is necessary to highlight the impact of the pandemic on the education of Roma children – local governments provided children with the necessary technical tools, however, in some cases, there was a lack meaningful engagement (completion of homework) and an inability of the parents of Roma children to provide assistance in the use of technology and, accordingly, in studies. Therefore, education institutions prepared printed materials. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19, tests results of Roma children are lower than those of other children. It is necessary to stress that there were also Roma parents who cooperated with education institutions very actively, during COVID-19.

COVID-19 has had similar effects on Roma as on other nationalities, such as psychological issues in both adults and children; the use of intoxicating substances and violence; remote learning and isolation also had an impact.

No impact of COVID-19 on Roma in housing and social assistance was observed. However, the municipalities that are closer to the land border of the Republic of Latvia, pointed out that the ban on travel restricted the possibilities for income. For example, in previous years, Roma used the opportunity to buy goods in Lithuania and Poland and resell them in Latvia. Those activities were not possible during the COVID-19 restrictions. Some local governments indicated that Roma had been more sceptical regarding vaccination due to COVID-19, however the situation began to change later on.

Recommendations

Participation and engagement

1. If there are Roma NGOs or Roma community activists in the municipality, it would be advisable to invite them to participate in the work of the municipal government commissions, in order to provide information on the most pressing issues of the Roma community. This would form a model of cooperation on an equal footing.
2. To develop cooperation with the Roma community on several levels at the same time, for example, by cooperating with Roma NGOs/Roma community activists, providing a possibility to participate in locally funded project competitions, engaging Roma mediators, and providing Roma teaching assistants in education institutions.
3. For local governments to evaluate the possibility of participating in the project set up by the Ministry of Culture and introduce the Roma mediator service in their local government².

Education and children's rights

4. It is necessary for local authorities to improve the identification of children who have reached compulsory educational age, even in cases where the child is not registered (declared) in the municipality concerned or is abroad³.
5. It is advisable for local governments to ensure fully paid catering services in pre-school education institutions, at least for the children from needy or low-income families or large families.
6. Local governments should encourage Roma families to ensure that Roma children receive adequate education. For example, the following actions could be taken to motivate Roma families to ensure that children attend basic educational institutions:

² Complies with Measure 4.1 of the draft "Plan for the Implementation of the Measures of the Roma Strategic Framework 2022-2023".

³ Complies with Measure 4.14. of the draft "Plan for the Implementation of the Measures of the Roma Strategic Framework 2022-2023".

6.1. ensure fully paid catering services in education institutions (for all grades), at least for the children from needy or low-income families or large families;

6.2. ensure the functioning of after-school day-care centres, where children could receive study support;

6.3. involve Roma children in vocational or interest education activities to promote children's motivation to acquire basic education.

7. Provide a Roma teaching assistant in education institutions attended by a several Roma children⁴.

8. Education institutions attended by several Roma children are advised to organise special events during the school year to learn about and preserve Roma culture, similar to the organisation of activities dedicated to other minority cultures.

9. The local governments responsible for the protection of the rights of children living in their administrative territory⁵ should take concrete actions to reduce the exposure of Roma children to practices harmful to children, such as early pregnancy, child employment, discontinuation of primary education or lack of attendance at education establishments.

10. The Ministry of Education and Science has been asked to assess and provide information to the Ombudsman on the work of the pedagogical medical commissions of local governments, and the alleged practice of unjustifiably placing Roma children in special educational institutions or providing education in inappropriate special educational programmes, by 1 November 2022. The Ombudsman has also asked for information on whether Roma children who are taught in accordance with special educational programmes are provided with teaching assistants from the Roma community who could communicate with them in a language they understand. If not, how exactly do Roma children with codes SIP 58 or 59 acquire education.

⁴ Complies with Measure 4.11 of the draft "Plan for the Implementation of the Measures of the Roma Strategic Framework 2022-2023".

⁵ Section 67(1) of the Law on the Protection of Children's Rights.

Housing

11. In order to promote Roma maintenance skills and improve maintenance-related payment discipline, local governments are urged to raise the awareness of Roma to the need to pay utilities by:

11.1. explaining and providing timely warnings of the possible adverse consequences of their actions, such as an accumulation of debt and forced eviction from the residential space, in co-operation with building managers, representatives of the social service and Roma mediators;

11.2. organising courses on rights' literacy, and developing information campaigns.

12. In order to address the issue of insufficient housing stock, local governments are asked to assess the possibility of increasing the housing stock by redirecting additional financing to the construction of new residential houses or to the renovation of existing ones.

Social issues

13. Municipalities with a population of Roma should be encouraged to develop and maintain verbal communication, in particular with the help of Roma mediators, as this is the most effective way of communicating information within the Roma community due to their good cooperation with Roma mediators and the close links between Roma.

14. The initiative of local authorities to organise and provide activities to promote adult learning and invite Roma to take part in them should be encouraged, as this could reduce the unknown but apparently significant number of illiterate Roma in municipalities and thus increase the employability of Roma⁶.

15. The Ombudsperson urges local governments to develop a template submission form that would simplify the application procedure for social assistance.

⁶ Complies with Measure 4.16. of the draft "Plan for the Implementation of the Measures of the Roma Strategic Framework 2022-2023".