

## Factsheet: Roma Housing in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovakia and Romania

Contact: Sinan Gokçen, Media and Communications Officer, [sinan.gokcen@errc.org](mailto:sinan.gokcen@errc.org), +36.30.500.1324

This factsheet highlights the findings of ERRC research conducted in 2009-2010 on the housing situation of Roma in **Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia and Slovakia**.

### RESEARCH: THE CONTENT AND THE METHODOLOGY

Housing is one of the most immediate and pressing concerns for Roma across Europe. Whether it be an impending eviction, poor conditions, denial of access to housing and utilities or simply unaffordable costs, housing troubles impact all areas of life.

This study, developed within the project, “Empowerment of Roma to Fight Rights Deprivation”, supported by the United Nations Democracy Fund, documented the housing situation of Roma in **Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia and Slovakia**. The research conducted within this study included a definition of housing covering the broadest scope possible, including houses, apartments, caravans, encampments, informal types of housing, etc.

This study is distinguished from previous research by its methodology: it employed Roma as researchers, authors and reviewers. Through this study, Romani activists at the grassroots level were empowered to promote the application of international human rights standards related to housing rights in national legislation.

### FINDINGS

The right to adequate housing has been codified by almost all the international human rights bodies and conventions. International legal standards ban any form of discrimination, including racial discrimination, either direct or indirect, in access to those housing rights.

Despite these protections, the preliminary findings of the research indicate that Roma in **Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia and Slovakia** live in substandard housing conditions. Although each country has its own characteristics, housing which fails to meet adequate living standards is a common issue facing many Roma in these countries.

Furthermore, research in this study confirmed that **racism** and **discrimination** pose obstacles to Roma accessing adequate housing conditions. Discrimination from **public officials** is apparent not only during the process of forced evictions, but also in access to social housing. **Private citizens** were also found to have discriminated against Roma in access to publicly available rental accommodation and to have organised campaigns during or prior to collective evictions as they tried to prevent Roma from relocating to their neighbourhoods. In extreme cases, non-Roma have attacked and set fire to the temporary housing prepared for Roma.

Many Roma communities lack **security of tenure**; other housing rights violations can arise from this fundamental problem. A significant number of Roma in the target countries live in informal settlements,

which makes them vulnerable to forced evictions that may occur at any time. Many of these communities have existed for 50 or 100 years, but are excluded from the local urban plans. Frequently, urban development work has failed to take into consideration the presence of Romani settlements which have existed for many years.

Local authorities continue to **forcibly evict** Roma, or disrupt their lives by threatening Romani residents with **forced evictions and destruction of their property**. Many of the evictions conducted may be characterised as illegal because they were carried out in the **absence of due process, prior consultation with the residents or the provision of adequate alternative accommodation**. Although consultation with the affected communities prior to the eviction was documented in some cases, the Roma concerned often reported that the promised arrangements were not fully granted after the eviction. At times, local authorities destroyed the homes of Roma without allowing residents the opportunity to remove their personal belongings.

Roma face a series of specific obstacles, including lack of information, restrictions and discriminatory criteria, which impede their **access to social housing**. The eligibility criteria and procedures for accessing social housing are often unclear: Eligibility criteria concerning **employment status** and length of employment may have a disproportionately negative impact on Roma who experience high levels of unemployment, and often face long-term unemployment. Lack of **personal documents** also poses a barrier to accessing social housing. Furthermore, some authorities have built **segregated social housing** which only houses Romani residents, deepening their isolation.

In the target countries, many Roma live in **substandard housing conditions**, characterised by a lack of basic services and infrastructure. The **overcrowded** conditions of improvised, dilapidated homes do not protect the residents against the elements. Some communities are located next to garbage dumps or other **hazardous areas**. The roads are often not paved, thus they can be impassable during bad weather and public transportation is frequently not provided or is distant. The substandard housing conditions of Roma negatively affect their **access to education and employment**, as well as **access to healthcare institutions** and generally prompt a deterioration in the health of people living in these settlements.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The ERRC urges the Governments of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia and Slovakia to act on the following recommendations:

1. Involve members of affected Romani communities in the planning and implementation of all actions to address their housing situation from the very earliest stages;
2. Provide “amnesty” for all informal Romani settlements; establish a “year zero” for the purposes of zoning and future regulation; revise urban plans when necessary to include all informal communities present; resolve outstanding issues of land ownership arising from the transition to democracy; and grant title to land and property to persons factually resident on a particular plot;
3. Bring to justice any public officials and other actors responsible for discriminating against Roma in access to adequate housing or conducting forced evictions in breach of national and international law;
4. Combat segregation by investing in the development of integrated, safe locations and taking steps to ensure that Romani communities have practical and affordable housing alternatives;
5. Use all appropriate means to guarantee protection against forced evictions;
6. Provide, without delay, adequate potable water, electricity, waste removal, public transport, road access and other public infrastructure in Romani settlements which presently lack one or more of the above;
7. Review and amend all laws and regulations to ensure that Roma are able to access social housing equally with non-Roma;
8. Establish, monitor and enforce conditions on the access and use of all housing-related funds, including:
  - a. Demonstrating that the use of funding will not lead to or further human rights violations, such as segregation;
  - b. Demonstrating that the use of funding promotes equal opportunities and integration.