

WRITTEN COMMENTS

BY THE EUROPEAN ROMA RIGHTS CENTRE CONCERNING UKRAINE

ERRC briefing note on situation of Roma in Ukraine prior to the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) sixth cycle country monitoring visit to Ukraine (14–18 July 2025)

CHALLENGING DISCRIMINATION PROMOTING EQUALITY

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Issues facing Romani IDPs inside Ukraine	4
Romani children in state care	5
Children in care during wartime	6
School segregation	7

The ERRC has engaged in campaigning, action research and litigation in defense of Roma Rights in Ukraine for 20 years. Prior to the full-scale Russian invasion, available data, often collected by civil society organisations, and research conducted by ERRC and others, indicated that many Romani communities in Ukraine live in conditions of extreme poverty, often in segregated settlements or irregular encampments, with little or no access to essential services such as clean water and sanitation, adequate health care provision, and quality integrated education.

Other major issues of concerns were racially motivated acts of collective punishment and violence against Roma by far right groups often in collusion with local authorities; the lack of personal documents, the risk of statelessness, and its consequences; the lack of comprehensive or reliable ethnically disaggregated data essential for the design and costing of integration policies, and without which progress or otherwise cannot be measured; denial of access to quality reproductive healthcare.

Discrimination and forced evictions by local authorities, as well as collusion with far-right militias in expelling Roma, and residential segregation is testimony to a long-standing crisis that has profound consequences for the health and welfare of Romani women, children and men. Failure to prosecute perpetrators of racially motivated hate crimes creates a climate of impunity for far-right groups, and their ‘service provision’ for local authorities further endangers Roma. As Vadim Karasev, director of independent Kiev-based think tank Institute of Global Strategies told [Associated Press](#): “State institutions are weak, the police are ineffective and the government is forced to resort more and more to the services of right-wing groups, giving them a carte blanche in return.”

The ERRC submission to the UNHRC in 2020 details pogroms and acts of violence against Roma by far-right groups and numerous acts of police brutality. Concerning reproductive rights, the submission includes details of research conducted by ERRC and Roma Fund Chiricli, which found that pregnant Romani women face degrading and discriminatory treatment when accessing reproductive healthcare, especially when giving birth.¹

¹ ERRC, Written comments for consideration by the UN Human Rights Committee 129th Session, July 2020. Available [here](#).

ISSUES FACING ROMANI IDPS INSIDE UKRAINE

Two ERRC research reports, *Roma Rights Under Siege* (2023) and *Temporary Protection* (2024) focused mainly on the discrimination faced by Romani refugees from Ukraine who fled to neighbouring countries following the full-scale invasion by Russian military forces. However, monitoring carried out for the first report published in 2023, highlighted the precarious situation of displaced Roma inside Ukraine.

For Romani IDPs, members of the most marginalised and excluded minority in Ukraine, these challenges were exacerbated by long-standing anti-Roma prejudice and, for many, the extreme poverty and precarity that characterised their lives before the war. Research conducted by Vox Populi Agency in 2021 found that among Romani respondents surveyed in seven regions (Cherkasy, Donetsk, Kharkiv, Luhansk, Odesa, Volyn, and Zakarpattia) 77% of household income was derived from informal and temporary employment, became even more difficult with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, *“but since the outbreak of war — when Roma families in affected areas have been trapped for weeks in bomb shelters under constant bombardment, unable to earn an income and dependent on their rapidly dwindling personal savings — the situation has become even more precarious.”*²

The study found that dependence on local informal work and the widespread lack of educational or professional qualifications, compounded by discrimination, have made it almost impossible for displaced Roma to find employment in other areas of Ukraine or abroad. This left many with no option but to wait for government support, and hope for the opportunity to return home to resume their informal employment activities. Unable to find free accommodation or rent out an apartment, many internally displaced Roma have been forced to stay for long periods in overcrowded temporary centres, leaving many with no option but to return to non-safe areas, or to seek refuge abroad. A study conducted by Roma Women Fund ‘Chiricli’ revealed that only 24% of a group of 441 Romani IDPs who fled to Zakarpatska Oblast managed to rent an apartment. Others were hosted by relatives, shelter or a religious institution.³ Romani NGOs, such as ‘Chiricli’ and the Youth Agency for the Advocacy of Roma Culture (ARCA), and churches played a pivotal role in addressing the humanitarian crisis, supplying food, medicines, and hygiene products, as well as evacuating Roma to safety and providing IDPs with shelter and essential supplies.

Lack of personal documentation, a long-standing issue for as many as 30,000 Roma, assumed a new significance since the Russian invasion, adding to the difficulties Roma IDPs face in accessing asylum and humanitarian assistance. According to complaints received by ‘Chiricli’, Romani women and children were barred from crossing the border into Moldova, Poland, and Hungary to seek protection. Internally displaced Roma fleeing from frontline areas to the relative safety of other regions have found that their lack of paperwork meant their status as IDPs was not officially recognised and they were denied the emergency financial assistance available to support IDPs. There have also been reports that, in the Chernihiv region, access to humanitarian aid was conditional on providing personal documentation, leaving displaced Roma with no papers with no means of survival.⁴

ERRC human rights monitors reported significant numbers of Roma internally displaced from the conflict zones in the East of the country (either in 2014, or more recently) who are without identification documents. Many lack documentation because of the risk of statelessness faced by numerous Romani communities in Ukraine due to historical discrimination.⁵ Others simply lost their documents along with the sudden loss of their homes when the conflict turned to full scale war, and they were forced to flee for safety. Frequently, those who have arrived in areas of relative safety in the Southwest of the country have severe burns and injuries, as well as chronic health conditions exacerbated by the war conditions. ERRC human rights monitors and lawyers who are working to provide access to identification documents for these people have reported that without ID, many struggle to access certain medical attention and aid services.

² European Union Agency for Asylum (EUA), *Forced displacement from and within Ukraine: Profiles, experiences, and aspirations of affected populations*, October 2022. pp. 33-38. Available at: https://eua.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2022-11/2022_11_09_Forcible_Displacement_Ukraine_Joint_Report_EUAA_IOM_OECD_0.pdf.

³ International Charitable Organization Roma Women Fund “Chiricli”, *The situation of Romani internally displaced people in the wartime. A research*, 10 August 2022. Available at: <http://www.chiricli.com.ua/index.php/ua/novini/item/277-stanovyshche-romiv-doslidzhennia>.

⁴ Viola Popenko, ‘For displaced Roma, the conflict has exacerbated existing patterns of discrimination – and left them without an income’, *Minority Rights Group*, Trends 2022. Available at: <https://minorityrights.org/programmes/library/trends/trends2022/ukraine/>.

⁵ European Roma Rights Centre, ‘Roma Belong: Statelessness, Discrimination and Marginalisation of Roma in Ukraine’, European Roma Rights Centre, March 2018. Available at: <http://www.errc.org/reports-and-submissions/roma-belong--statelessness-discrimination-and-marginalisation-of-roma-in-ukraine>.

ROMANI CHILDREN IN STATE CARE

The need for reforms led to the initiation of the deinstitutionalisation (DI) process of child care in Ukraine. DI reform was initiated in 2017 and was meant to shift child-care from the state institutions to families or family-type environments. As the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine in 2017 admitted in the National strategy for deinstitutionalisation, *“the [Ukrainian] system of institutional care and upbringing of children is not only costly, but also inefficient and harmful both for the child him/herself and for his/her family and society as a whole.”*

Data shows that disproportionate numbers of Romani children are removed from their families and placed in state care. Among the goals of the DI reform was the ambitious declaration that from 2020 no child under the age of three should end up in children’s homes as this is considered the most traumatic experience, especially at such a young age. The reform envisaged an annual reduction by 10% and 5% of the number of specialised institutions, special boarding schools, and lyceums with round-the-clock care as of 2019. It was envisaged that the number of children ending up in institutional care establishments should be reduced to 0.5%.

The DI process had stalled before the Russian invasion, and the most important reason for its pre-war failings according to experts is that no specific budget line was envisaged for its implementation, with 12 billion UAH (around 317 million EUR) still being allocated to institutional care establishments in 2020. These resources could have been directed towards creating favourable conditions for children in foster families, family-type children’s homes, or the reintegration of children into their own families. The Ukrainian Government emphasised its commitment to continuing DI reform after the end of the war. Daria Herasymchuk, Adviser to the President of Ukraine on children’s rights, stated that:

“Even the best establishment of institutional care, for a round-the-clock stay of a child, definitely does not give what a family can give. It is necessary to look for an alternative, [and] family forms of upbringing are the best substitute ... after the war we will continue to do everything to ensure that children are brought up in families, and the system of protecting children’s rights is improved.”

Post-war DI processes will have to take heed of expert opinion which identifies the priority issue as the development of social services on the local level to provide support for vulnerable families to prevent separation of children from their parents. The vulnerability of Romani families will need to be taken into account when reviving DI after the end of the war.⁶

⁶ ERRC, *In Time of War: Romani children in state care in Ukraine*. ERRC, July 2023. Available [here](#).

CHILDREN IN CARE DURING WARTIME

The ERRC report pointed to the likelihood that Romani children formerly in state care are among the ‘stolen children’, the many thousands of youngsters forcibly abducted by the Russians, in what has been described as a cruel and inhumane policy that bears the characteristics of genocide. Unaccompanied children and children from state care institutions have been at higher risk of illegal adoptions. The lack of ethnically disaggregated data meant that it was impossible to give a precise number, but due to the high percentage of Roma in Oblasts such as Donetsk and Luhansk and the more general overrepresentation of Romani children in state care, *“it is extremely likely that there were Romani children in the child care institutions in the occupied territories and a strong likelihood that many have been deported to Russia.”*

The absence of clear government-approved procedures in the first weeks following the Russian invasion resulted in uncoordinated responses such as untimely evacuations or failure to evacuate institutions close to combat zones or occupied territories; or the instant return of children to their family homes without prior risk assessment.

Former Minister of Social Policy, Maryna Lazebna, criticised the shortcomings of the institutions in the wake of the invasion: *“Some managers of institutions where children are kept around the clock refuse to transfer them to safe places, do not coordinate their actions with regional military administrations and central executive authorities. This is not an issue that can be debated. Children must be protected.”*

Tragically, many children were not evacuated in time and remained stuck in territories occupied by the Russian forces. Some children were returned to their parents who subsequently missed the chance to be evacuated in time from towns which fell to the occupiers just days after the invasion.

However, most Romani children who were in children’s homes and other state care establishments were either been evacuated to the safe regions of Ukraine and accommodated in the institutional premises on those territories, or they were evacuated abroad. They face the same challenges as other Ukrainian children in state care: limited access to education, poor living conditions due to overcrowding and a lack of quality care.⁷

7 ERRC News, *Another Russian War Crime*, 06 March 2023. Available [here](#).

SCHOOL SEGREGATION

The Eighth Appeal Administrative court has found in favour of a Romani mother whose two children were denied access to an integrated school in Uzhgorod and told they must attend a segregated, Roma-only school instead. The European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) brought a case on 24th May 2021 against Uzhgorod City Council on behalf of Ljudmila Churej, concerning a city council decision which artificially divided two schools' catchment areas to ensure Romani children from the Telmana Street neighbourhood attended only a segregated school. The ruling of the 18th April 2022 overturned a negative first instance Administrative Court decision and finds the city council practice to be discriminatory.

One side of Telmana Street in Uzhgorod is home to a majority-Roma neighbourhood, where the standard of housing is visibly poor: many houses are not officially registered, many have limited or no access to public water and sewerage. The houses on the other side belong mostly to non-Roma, where they generally live in much better conditions. The discriminatory city council decisions from 2017 meant that children living in even-numbered houses on Telmana Street (the non-Romani side) were enrolled in the mainstream "School No.7", while those living in odd-numbered houses (the Romani side) were enrolled in the 100% segregated "School No.13". The Court in its judgment noted that *"secondary school № 13 enrolls only Roma children, whose level of education is much lower than in other educational institutions."* As a result of the judgment, the City Council have removed the division of the street, and Romani parents are free to enrol their children in the mainstream "School No.7".

The ERRC found this to be a remarkable commitment to the rule of law in a time of war, *"that there are judicial bodies willing to rule against racial segregation and discrimination of Roma, even as cities are being reduced to rubble,"*⁸ and expressed the hope that school desegregation will be completed across Ukraine after the war is over.

⁸ ERRC News, Ukrainian Court Rules for Romani Family Against School Segregation, 29 April 2022. Available [here](#).