

WRITTEN COMMENTS

of the European Roma Rights Centre, concerning North Macedonia

For Consideration by the United Nations Human Rights Committee at its 144th
Session (23 June – 17 July 2025)

CHALLENGING DISCRIMINATION PROMOTING EQUALITY

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INTRODUCTION

In the 2021 HRC List of Issues prior to submission of the fourth periodic report of North Macedonia, concerns were raised about the structural discrimination faced by Roma, and the authorities were asked to respond to allegations of discriminatory targeting and ethnic profiling of Romani people at borders that unduly limit their freedom of movement. The Committee further asked the authorities to address reports that Romani children face different forms of institutional and societal discrimination, including being segregated from other children within State schools, and facing barriers to health care.

The authorities were asked to respond to allegations of torture and ill-treatment by police officers, and to reports that members of minority groups, particularly Roma, have been disproportionately targeted by perpetrators; and to provide information about the legal framework and complaints mechanisms that are in place for victims, including data about the number of complaints, investigations, prosecutions, convictions and remedies provided to victims.

This submission by the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC)¹ highlights a number of issues concerning discrimination faced by Roma since 2021. These include violence against women, access to justice and police brutality, school segregation, and barriers to accessing basic services. Based on the evidence and research highlighted below, the ERRC asserts that the concerns raised by the HRC in 2021 have not been adequately addressed by the State party, and remain very pertinent to this day.

FEMICIDE AND OTHER FORMS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST ROMANI WOMEN

3 May 2025: Femicide. Ramajana Asan, a 36-year-old Romani Woman from Šuto Orizari was murdered by her partner in front of her five-year-old daughter in her home on 3 May 2025. According to the *Network for Support of Romani Women: Ramajana* this case was emblematic of broader structural failures in the prevention of gender-based violence: “*Romani women are among the most affected by violence and the least protected. In 2024 alone, 142 cases of domestic violence against Romani women were registered in North Macedonia.*”

Despite multiple reports of domestic violence made by Ramajana—including in the presence of her father and other witnesses—authorities failed to file a formal criminal complaint or implement protective measures. Police officers allegedly dismissed her complaints, reassuring her that she would ‘reconcile’ with her abuser, rather than conducting risk assessments or pursuing legal action. Despite standard police protocols requiring officers to assess risk levels, gather evidence such as visible injuries, and make arrests when there is probable cause to believe a family offense has been committed.

“It appears that these procedures were not properly adhered to in Ramajana’s case”, according to the Romani women’s network, which described the police response as a significant deviation from established practice for domestic violence cases, which *“include treating all reports with seriousness, conducting private interviews in appropriate settings, documenting evidence, and taking immediate action when danger is present.”*

They described the pattern of inaction as a failure of the State to fulfil its obligations under the law on domestic violence, as well as the Istanbul Convention: *“The lack of a prompt, thorough, and victim-centred institutional response – including from the police, social services, and judiciary – signals systemic neglect that must be addressed with urgency.”*

The letter cites studies and data which reveal the scale of domestic violence in North Macedonia, and which indicate that in the majority of femicide cases, victims had previously reported incidents of violence to authorities without receiving sufficient protection. The Center for the Support of Women Victims of Gender-Based and Domestic Violence *ISI ARKA*, located in Šuto Orizari, has documented numerous cases indicating that Romani women encounter significant barriers when reporting domestic violence, exacerbated by multiple

¹ The ERRC is a Roma-led international public interest law organisation working to combat anti-Romani racism and human rights abuse of Roma through strategic litigation, research and policy development, advocacy and human rights education. The ERRC has consultative status with the Council of Europe, as well as with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. More information is available at: <https://www.errc.org/>.

forms of discrimination. Women from this community consistently express feelings of abandonment by institutional entities, citing sluggish and inadequate responses to their complaints. The ERRC submitted a complaint to the Equality Body against the Ministry of Interior. For more detail [see here](#).

POLICE BRUTALITY AND ACCESS TO JUSTICE FOR ROMA

In 2023, the ERRC in partnership with Fair Trials, examined the impact of anti-Roma racism on the criminal justice system in North Macedonia. The evidence confirmed that at every stage of criminal proceedings, from arrest until sentencing, Romani defendants are faced with discriminatory attitudes and biases which leads to skewed decisions and unjust outcomes.²

Romani interviewees were clear that they had no trust in a system they perceived to be plainly unjust; and the reasons why included ethnic profiling, over-policing, inhuman and degrading mistreatment and racially abusive behaviour in encounters with Roma. Cases taken by the ERRC to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) cited below, are clearly not a cluster of ‘bad apple anomalies’, but rather indicative of racism and discrimination that is embedded in the structures of the state.

The cases are illustrative of a wider, systemic pattern of police brutality against Roma, routine behaviours that include verbal racial abuse; random kicking and beating of suspects and anyone else that happens to be Roma and in the vicinity; ill-treatment and torture of detainees to extract confessions; and violent raids by special police units targeting Romani neighbourhoods and dwellings.

After two decades of recommendations and judgments, one graphic illustration of the lack of progress is the 2024 observation that *“there is no legitimate reason for non-standard objects, such as hand-held electric shock devices to be kept in rooms used for interviewing suspects”*; and the recommendation that *“any non-standard item that might be used for inflicting ill-treatment should be removed from all police premises where persons may be held or questioned.”*³

ROMA IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

Romani police officers from North Macedonia, who were interviewed in the *Justice Denied* report, took it as a given that there was widespread mistrust in the criminal justice system among Roma, who, by virtue of profound marginalisation, cannot navigate the workings of the system, and are either not fully aware of their rights, nor in a position to effectively assert those rights. The officers reported regularly hearing their colleagues make insulting and derogatory remarks about Roma.⁴

Most of the Romani interviewees from North Macedonia had experienced verbal racist abuse and physical intimidation by police officers. One described how he was taken into custody in a neighbourhood round-up of Roma after reports of a crime, and told: *“If you refuse to plead guilty during the interrogation process, then a police officer will force you to do so by slapping you in the face and beating you, and you will end up in pre-trial detention.”* A Romani police officer confirmed that the experience of this victim was commonplace and told researchers: *“During interrogations, Roma are forced into signing documents in which they admit to committing some criminal offence and they do not even know what they are signing.”*⁵

In 2020 and 2021 alone, the ERRC won two strategic litigation cases against North Macedonia at the European Court of Human Rights on account of the state’s failure to conduct effective investigations into allegations of police brutality against Roma.⁶

2 ERRC and Fair Trials, *Justice Denied: Roma in The Criminal Justice System of North Macedonia* 14 February 2023. Available [here](#).

3 Council of Europe, *News 2024, Council of Europe anti-torture Committee (CPT) publishes report on North Macedonia*. 15 May 2024. Available [here](#).

4 ERRC and Fair Trials, *Justice Denied: Roma in The Criminal Justice System of North Macedonia* 14 February 2023. Available [here](#).

5 *Ibid*.

6 European Court of Human Rights, *Case of Memedov v North Macedonia*. Strasbourg, 24 June 2021. Available [here](#); ERRC Press Release, 9 November 2020. Available [here](#).

All Romani respondents agreed that Roma were more likely to face arrest in North Macedonia. Most defence lawyers attributed this apparent overrepresentation to the socio-economic disadvantages faced by Roma and their lack of legal knowledge, but there were also suggestions that actors within the system played a role in arresting, charging, and convicting Romani individuals more readily on account of their own prejudices, whether unconscious or conscious. Other explanations for the overrepresentation included the inadequacy of legal assistance, and the lack of support and rehabilitation measures to reduce the risk of reoffending.

Despite denials by judges and prosecutors that ethnic bias had any bearing on the workings of the justice system, Romani interviewees at the receiving end of North Macedonian-style justice found the system's workings to be neither colourblind nor just. The institutional bias and basic unfairness of the justice system was also a concern for defence lawyers. One defence lawyer told researchers: *"There have been cases when I felt that a judgment was discriminatory. For example, I represented a (Roma) client who was given a three-and-a-half-year prison sentence without evidence being presented at court."* Seven of the nine lawyers interviewed said that they had been similarly involved in, or knew of, cases where they felt that the outcome had been discriminatory against Romani defendants.⁷

ECTHR: ERRC VS THE STATE OF NORTH MACEDONIA

Twenty years ago, ECRI expressed concerns about racist policing, unsatisfactory investigation mechanisms, and the fear of reprisals that inhibited victims from making complaints.⁸ The 2023 report from ECRI makes for salutary reading in that it confirms, as far as law enforcement is concerned old habits die hard – and the recommendations remain the same.

On a positive note, ECRI reported that following the release of a video on social media showing police officers physically abusing Romani citizens in Bitola in September 2020, disciplinary action was taken against the officers involved and criminal charges were filed. The Bitola Basic Court sentenced one officer to a year in prison for use of excessive force, and the Minister of the Interior publicly condemned the incident. However, ECRI added that aside from this instance, *"NGOs maintain that police ill-treatment against Roma was still not adequately investigated and prosecuted and considered that not enough was done to prevent such cases."*⁹

The concerns raised by the ERRC in its reports, were echoed by the European Commission in its 2021 report on North Macedonia, where concern was expressed that *"the civilian external oversight mechanism over the police is not fully functional, and the absence of genuinely independent investigators impedes efforts to address police impunity and effective prosecution."*¹⁰ In its 2023 report, the Commission noted that *"the external oversight mechanism for the police, including the prison police, is still not fully functional"*, and that all reported cases must be investigated without delay and safeguards against ill treatment by the police must be implemented systematically.¹¹

With regards to issues of discriminatory policing raised by the ERRC, ECRI in its 2023 report, recommended that the authorities intensify their efforts to prevent and combat antigypsyism in policing. ECRI called for determined action to encourage Roma victims and witnesses of police abuse to come forward, provide them with appropriate support and ensure better police accountability notably by developing effective internal and external police oversight mechanisms, increase police training on issues affecting Roma populations, promote Roma recruitment to police services and ensure that Roma police officers enjoy equal opportunities for career development.¹²

The following selection of ECtHR cases provide a reminder that when it comes to state discrimination and racist brutality, all too often domestic remedies get exhausted, and the pursuit of justice must move to the Strasbourg court, where a judgment typically takes years. Justice delayed is justice denied. Investigations into racially motivated police brutality need to be prompt, independent and thorough, and punishment must be proportionate.

7 ERRC and Fair Trials, *Justice Denied: Roma in The Criminal Justice System of North Macedonia* 14 February 2023. Available [here](#).

8 ECRI, *Third report on "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia"*. Adopted on 25 June 2004. Available [here](#).

9 ECRI, *Report on North Macedonia (sixth monitoring cycle)* 20 September 2023. Available [here](#).

10 European Commission, *Commission Staff Working Document, North Macedonia 2021 Report*, 19 October 2021. Available at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/242f0886-30ec-11ec-bd8e-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>.

11 European Commission, *Commission Staff Working Document North Macedonia 2023 Report*. Available [here](#).

12 ECRI Report on Macedonia (6th monitoring cycle) 29 June 2023. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/sixth-ecri-report-on-northmacedonia/1680ac8c47>.

24 October 2023: *Roma win landmark European judgment condemning racial profiling at the border in North Macedonia.* The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) ruled against North Macedonia in a landmark judgment which condemned racial profiling of Roma at the border. The judgment, *Memedova & Others v North Macedonia*, pertains to five Romani applicants who were represented by the ERRC and lawyers affiliated with the Macedonian Young Lawyers Association (MYLA). The Court found that four of the Romani individuals had been subjected to discrimination and that their freedom of movement had been violated. North Macedonia is required to compensate them within three months of the decision with varying amounts of non-pecuniary damages totalling €13,000 collectively.¹³

25th June 2021: *ECtHR finds that North Macedonia failed to investigate racist motivation in police brutality case.* In the *case of Memedov vs North Macedonia*, the ECtHR ruled in favour of a Romani man who was physically assaulted by police officers in a racist attack during a violent raid in Topana, a Romani neighbourhood of Skopje, North Macedonia.

The incident occurred in 2013, when special police units conducted a raid using force which the ERRC described at the time as ‘excessive and arbitrary’. Around 50 police officers were involved in attacking both women and men. Roma from the Topana neighbourhood told the ERRC that officers forcibly entered several Romani houses and local shops without providing any explanation; harassing and pushing people, often in the presence of children. Roma reported that police officers kicked and punched them with fists and police batons. Around ten Romani individuals were beaten up, including three women. The applicant in the ECtHR case was in a shop at the time when police burst in and attacked him. He was kicked and punched by a large group of police officers, who also shouted racial insults at him.

The ERRC helped him to go directly to the public prosecutor and file a complaint. Years later, this complaint was still pending with no indication that it would ever be investigated. The ERRC brought three cases at once: two before the domestic civil court against the national police and against the public prosecutor, and one before the ECtHR. The Strasbourg Court found that the state authorities were in violation of Article 14 read in conjunction with Article 3 of the Convention on account of their failure to investigate the applicant’s allegations of racially motivated police brutality. The Court ordered the State to pay the applicant EUR 3,000 within three months.¹⁴

9 November 2020: *ECtHR orders North Macedonia to compensate Roma brutalised by police as teenagers.* In the case of *X and Y vs North Macedonia*, the state was ordered by the court to pay €7,500 each to two Romani applicants, represented by the ERRC, who were brutalised as teenagers by police in Skopje in 2014. The ECtHR declared there had been a violation of Article 3 of the Convention on account of the failure of the authorities to conduct an effective investigation into the applicants’ allegations of police brutality, but held there had been no violation of Article 3 of the Convention on account of the alleged police brutality.¹⁵

Deaths in Prison: 12 February 2021 *Two Romani families receive compensation:* The Government of North Macedonia agreed to pay €24,000 to the families of two Romani men who died under suspicious circumstances while in prison in 2017. The ECtHR struck out the two cases after a settlement agreement was reached between the family members and the government.

Andrias Redjepov, a 21-year-old Romani man, died in KPU Idrizovo Prison, Skopje on 11 March 2017. He was reported to have died of a methadone overdose, despite not being a drug addict. There was also evidence that Redjepov had been tortured in the hours before his death. His parents will each receive €6,000 in damages.

Jusinov Erdal was a 25-year-old Romani man who died on the 22 March 2017 in KPD Shtip prison after medical treatment was apparently withheld for hours prior to his death. Jusinov was married, and the father of a three-year-old boy and one-year-old girl. There were also allegations of mistreatment by prison guards and doctors. His sister will receive €12,000 in damages.

13 ERRC Press Release, *Roma win landmark European judgment condemning racial profiling at the border in North Macedonia*, 30 October 2023. Available [here](#).

14 ERRC Press Release, *European Court Rules North Macedonia Failed to Investigate Racist Motivation in Police Brutality Case*, 25 June 2021. Available [here](#).

15 ERRC Press Release, *European Court Orders North Macedonia to Pay Compensation to Roma Brutalised by Police as Teenagers*, 9 November 2020. Available [here](#).

The deaths were part of a series of **four suspicious deaths of Romani inmates** in a nine-month period in 2017 in prisons across North Macedonia. The pattern of the deaths, involving drug overdose and allegations of mistreatment, is one which the ERRC has been litigating since at least **2010**. At the time of reporting, the ERRC's case regarding the suspicious death of another Romani man, **39-year-old Bekim Demir**, was still pending before the ECtHR.

The 2024 report from the Council of Europe anti-torture Committee (CPT) which focused on treatment by the police and the conditions in detention centres and prisons, including the effectiveness of investigations into complaints of alleged police ill-treatment, concluded that there has been *no improvement* in the treatment of persons deprived of their liberty by the police since its 2019 visit. The CPT received many allegations of police ill-treatment related to the time of arrest or questioning in a police inspector office: *"The allegations consisted of slaps, punches and kicks, as well as blows with truncheons and the butt of a weapon, inflicted on persons during their arrest or at the time of their questioning in an inspector's office."*¹⁶

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Police officers, including members of the police intervention teams, need to be trained to prevent and minimise use of force during arrests and be reminded of their duty to protect persons held in police custody. Where force is necessary, they must be able to use professional techniques that minimise the risk of harm to the persons they are trying to arrest. Professional training should also be provided for criminal investigation officers on appropriate interview and investigation techniques and the prevention of ill-treatment.
- Standard Operating Procedures need to be strengthened, in particular through the provision of access to a lawyer in a proactive manner, the provision of information on rights in a more systematic and consistent manner, and a more rigorous application of the standards in the field of provision of medical assistance in police custody.
- Prison medical services should fully play their role in preventing ill-treatment, by ensuring that: doctors in prisons indicate at the end of their traumatic injury reports the compatibility between one or more objective medical findings and the statements of the person concerned; ensure that traumatic injury reports relating to injuries likely to have been caused by ill-treatment (even in the absence of statements) are automatically forwarded to the body empowered to conduct investigations; and doctors advise the prisoner concerned that the writing of such a report falls within the framework of a system for preventing ill-treatment, that this report must automatically be forwarded to a clearly specified investigating body and that such forwarding does not substitute the lodging of a complaint in proper form.
- The authorities should put in place a system of doctors visiting police premises, who are fully trained on how to identify and record injuries. Where possible, traumatic injury reports should identify any causal link between one or more objective medical findings and the statements of the person concerned. A secure room in the hospital should be set aside where such examinations may be carried out in a safe, secure and confidential manner.

RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

The rights of Romani children are abused by school segregation and other forms of discrimination in every sphere of life. Precarious living conditions and extreme poverty negatively impact the ability of Roma pupils to succeed in schools. Inadequate housing causes problems with physical as well as mental health. Overcrowded households lack spaces for doing homework and learning. Excessive noise and insufficient light affect the ability to concentrate. All these problems often result in early school leaving and lower educational attainment as well as poorer literacy

In its 2022 report on North Macedonia, the European Commission noted its concern that despite the substantial set of social and child protection measures to combat the socio-economic consequences of COVID-19, analysis has demonstrated that relative child poverty has increased, putting an additional 19,000 children at risk.

16 Ibid.

The Commission called for further efforts to make the social protection system more child-sensitive based on a child-centred service delivery model, including by strengthening professional development and supervision in the delivery of good quality child protection services.

It also urged local governments and civil society organisations to improve cooperation with social work centres to develop and support new community services around the country, including services to support children at risk, Romani children, and children with disabilities who are victims of discrimination and segregation.¹⁷

In its 2023 Screening report, the European Commission found that structural challenges are inadequately addressed, such as the lack of resources by state institutions dealing with child rights, the lack of strategic documents on child rights and functioning of the statutory body responsible for overseeing implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and that efforts are needed to ensure equal access to quality education. An action plan for children, including a sufficient budget and sectoral models to provide effective services for children, has yet to be prepared. Cooperation among institutions to better understand and address the challenges faced by different groups of children such as children with disabilities, vulnerable children, children from minorities (including Romani children), is weak. Failure to address such structural challenges takes a greater toll on vulnerable children, especially marginalized Romani children who face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination.¹⁸ This fully concurs with ERRC's assessment of the failures to properly address the structural discrimination that denies Romani children their fundamental rights in North Macedonia. Below is a selection of illustrative cases taken by ERRC in recent years dealing with the right to education.

21 February 2024/Right to education: The Supreme Court of North Macedonia issued a groundbreaking ruling in favour of the ERRC concerning discrimination against Romani children in the Tetovo Correctional Home (currently located in Volkovija) with regard to their right to education. The collective complaint accused North Macedonia's juvenile correction system of failing to provide equal access to education for children placed in the correctional centre (direct discrimination by status). As most of the affected children were Romani, this also amounted to indirect discrimination based on ethnicity, violating the children's right to equality. The decision included the first ever analysis of indirect discrimination by this court in a collective complaint (*actio popularis*), highlighting that the focus should be on unequal treatment and the differential impacts experienced by individuals in various positions. For more detail see: <https://www.errc.org/press-releases/groundbreaking-supreme-court-judgment-for-romani-children-denied-education-in-juvenile-detention-in-north-macedonia>.

27 October 2022/Right to education: The Basic Court Skopje II in North Macedonia has ruled that the Ministry of Health discriminated against Romani minors with drug addiction problems by not providing them with treatment or rehabilitation. The Court ordered the Ministry to open a centre for child substance abuse treatment, adopt a specific treatment programme for child drug users, and pay procedural costs to the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC). The decision confirms a 2021 judgment from the same court which is now final and must be adopted by the Ministry of Health. The final judgment is the first successful collective complaint (*actio popularis*) to be brought by the ERRC in North Macedonia on behalf of Roma.

The ERRC argued that because Roma are over-represented in children who have substance abuse problems in North Macedonia, they are subject to indirect discrimination by not being provided treatment for drug addiction. The Court ruled that children in North Macedonia with drug addiction problems have their right to equality violated based on their age, as well as their status as a marginalised group of children drug users. The Court recognised that Romani children with drug addiction problems are additionally discriminated against on account of their ethnicity and over-representation amongst children drug users, as well as their right to health protection being continually violated by their lack of treatment.

1 February 2024/School segregation: North Macedonia's Equality Body, the Commission for Prevention and Protection from Discrimination, has issued an opinion against a primary school in Prilep for the "indirect, continued discrimination leading to segregation" of Romani pupils. The opinion, issued on 18th January, was the result of a complaint filed by the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) on behalf of Romani parents in September 2023 against Dobri Jovanovski primary school. It is the third such decision against a North Macedonian school in recent years after schools in Štip and Bitola were condemned for segregation of Romani children in February and August 2022.

17 European Commission, *Staff Working Document, North Macedonia 2022 Report*. Available [here](#).

18 European Commission, *Screening report - North Macedonia* 24 July 2023. Available [here](#).

The Commission issued several recommendations to different authorities which including urging Dobri Jovanovski municipal primary school to cease forming classes based on ethnicity and encouraging the Municipality of Prilep to observe catchment area regulations to promote desegregation. Other recommendations involve increasing the number of pedagogical assistants in schools, fostering cooperation between municipal authorities and civil society organisations, and implementing stricter criteria for child enrolment in different regions by the Ministry of Education and Science. The indicated institutions must implement these recommendations within six months of receiving the Commission's Opinion. For more detail see <https://www.errc.org/press-releases/north-macedonian-equality-body-finds-discrimination--segregation-of-roma-in-prilep-school>.

14 December 2022/School segregation: Romani parents whose children were segregated in two primary schools in North Macedonia have won an important **judgment** before the European Court of Human Rights against North Macedonia. The Court found that two primary schools, Gjorgji Sugarev in Bitola and Goce Delchev in Štip, had violated the Romani children's right to non-discrimination (Article 14) in conjunction with their right to education (Article 2 of Protocol 1). Each household has been awarded compensation of €1,200 EUR, totalling €45,600 across both schools. The issue was brought before the Court in two applications by the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC), who also secured decisions from the North Macedonian Equality Body to end segregation in **Bitola** and **Štip** earlier this year. For more detail: <https://www.errc.org/press-releases/european-court-rules-against-north-macedonia-for-segregation-of-romani-schoolchildren>.

19 August 2022/ School segregation: The Commission for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination of North Macedonia has issued an opinion against the "Gjorgji Sugarev" Primary School in Bitola, giving authorities six months to implement measures aimed at reducing segregation of Romani children in the school. The decision, made on 19th April 2022 and communicated on 12th August 2022, was in response to a complaint made by the ERRC against the municipal primary school for the segregation of Romani children. For more detail see: <https://www.errc.org/press-releases/equality-body-in-north-macedonia-orders-primary-school-to-end-segregation-of-roma>.

ROMANI CHILDREN IN STATE CARE

In 2023, the ERRC produced a research report *Promising Change: Romani children in state care in North Macedonia*. The North Macedonian government committed to "an intensive process of deinstitutionalization (DI)" where no child under 18 is placed in an institution after 2020, and all such institutions shut down or completely transformed by the end of 2023. This was coupled with frank admissions that the prior process was one of "uneven development, characterised by a series of stops, starts and considerable stalling."¹⁹

DI is taking place in a society, which according to child rights expert Kevin Byrne, has not yet developed a human rights culture, and where childrights are not embedded in social behaviour or service planning; an unequal society "where the whole framework for realising children's rights needs to be overhauled and reinvigorated", and where Romani children require "intense, concentrated and urgent action to mitigate the poverty, exclusion and overt discrimination they are enduring."

From the research interviews with staff at the small care homes, it can clearly be concluded that further progress on DI is hindered by staff shortages, low pay and high staff turnover for caregivers, which means added pressure on remaining staff. One interviewee described these critical staff shortages as a very concrete example of the state's failure to put the interests of the child first, by not providing adequate resources to ensure the best possible care for children at risk and in need.

Similarly, CSWs which are, according to UNICEF, the nexus for social care provision in the community, are particularly underrepresented in rural areas where they are needed most, and many existing Centres and Social Workers are overwhelmed with more cases than they can possibly manage, as well as being overburdened with administrative work, which "makes them less able to focus on preventive field work – work that may be the key to really support children and their families."

19 ERRC, *Promising Change: Romani children in state care in North Macedonia* 2023. Available here: https://www.errc.org/uploads/upload_en/file/5539_file1_promising-change-romani-children-in-state-care-in-north-macedonia.pdf.

Similar sentiments were expressed by the UNICEF representative to the ERRC, who found it difficult to say conclusively whether the system works in the best interests of the child, because the system is so fragmented and suggested that as far as a multi-sectoral holistic and comprehensive approach, there is still some way to go. The UNICEF 2021 report, while acknowledging the significant progress made in DI, noted that support services for families and caregivers remain limited, and mechanisms and capacities to prevent child abandonment and separation are inadequate, including at-risk Romani children, *“who need targeted services due to high levels of exposure to abuse, exploitation and separation from families.”*

From the interviews with staff at the small care homes, the conclusion was that further progress on DI is hindered by staff shortages, low pay and high staff turnover for caregivers, which means added pressure on remaining staff.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- State authorities should invest in prevention and avoid deprivation of parental rights, expand coverage of family social services, including parental programs, to all geographical areas by allocating sufficient financial, technical and human resources.
- Introduce a gatekeeping system with regard to alternative care, with the aim to reduce the number of children in out-of-home placement, prevent unsuitable entries into the care system and ensure the suitability of placement.
- Ensure that poverty, disability or ethnic origin are not accepted as valid reasons for the removal of children from their biological families; that removal is always an option of last resort, solely guided by the best interest of the child; ensure quality standards with clear guidelines are in place for child protection services; and that all care professionals receive training on the rights of the child.
- Ensure cross-sectoral coordination is in place to provide support for young people exiting the care system; and that SWCs have sufficient resources to monitor and support these young people after they turn 18, so that they can manage all aspects of independent living.
- Continue to strengthen and expand the foster care system, ensure that it is adequately funded, and increase capacity building, pre-training and in-care service with the aim to accommodate children who have suffered trauma, or have special needs. Ensure that there are regular reviews of placements, and wherever it is desired by the child, to sustain regular contacts with her biological parents, with the aim of family re-integration.
- Strengthen the Social Work Centres by increasing the number of social workers and ensure their 24/7 availability, formalize coordination and collaboration with all relevant sectors the aim of ensuring unified approach to support service for children at risk; ensure that all Small Group Homes are fully-staffed, and that staff are properly paid and adequately trained to provide optimal care for children with special needs, and ensure that all child victims of violence have access to trauma-focussed therapy.
- Avoid any spending cutbacks that might adversely affect basic social service provision. In fact, there is an urgent need to increase spending to further strengthen delivery of such services at local level, and to prioritise addressing the needs of children at risk, *“in particular Roma children and children from families facing poverty, disability, social exclusion and stigma”*
- Launch public education campaigns promoting a fully inclusive, rights-based and equity-focused approach to child welfare as a benefit for the entire society; sensitise local communities around issues to do with community care and small group homes to mitigate hostility or resistance; and raise awareness around fostering to mobilise new foster families, and to extend the network of foster carers nationally.

ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM

The environmental racism faced by Roma across Europe is a deliberate and structural form of discrimination. Across Europe's worst-off 'multiply-disadvantaged' regions, entire communities of Roma subsist in deep poverty, many are forced to live in close proximity to landfills or toxic sites.²⁰ In North Macedonia, as in other European countries, Roma are often spatially segregated from the rest of society, living in 'settlements', slum neighbourhoods, or improvised camps, and routinely denied equal access to clean water and sanitation, often cut off from affordable heating and electricity supplies. In many regions, mass demolitions and evictions frequently banish Romani communities to remote locations, devoid of infrastructure or public transport or services. Below are just two recent ERRC cases illustrative of the wider environmental discrimination faced by Roma.

29 April 2025: Victory for Roma in Šutka following mass complaint about waste pollution. On 29 April 2025, the North Macedonian equality body found in favour of Romani residents of the Municipality of Šuto Orizari who, together with the ERRC, filed a mass complaint against the City of Skopje about environmental racism. Years of official neglect and inadequate waste management left residents in a polluted and foully malodorous environment that posed a risk to their health, an assault on their dignity, and a violation of their right to equal access to public services. The City of Skopje has been given 30 days to clean up its act or face consequences.

In 2018, the ERRC first lodged a complaint on behalf of the residents against the municipality over access to public services and improper waste management. On 5 December 2024, another complaint was submitted by the ERRC, citing years of inadequate waste collection, the proliferation of illegal dumpsites, and the damage done to the right to a healthy environment. Residents complained that despite repeated assurances, things only got worse, and was further aggravated by the burning of uncollected waste. According to the citizens' complaint, the city's routine practices, which violate their dignity and create a degrading environment, stem from antigypsyism and systemic discrimination by the competent institutions.

The City of Skopje repeatedly failed to respond to requests for information by the commission, and up to the time of the drafting of its Opinion, the City authorities had made no submission to the commission, nor made any comment on the allegations in the complaint.

In its official response to the complaint, the Commission for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination found the city authorities guilty of indirect discrimination against the Romani residents of Šutka. The commission concluded that the *"seemingly neutral practice of the competent institutions in providing public services"* concretely results in the failure to provide equal quality of municipal services. This unequal provision of waste management services—when compared to other municipalities—resulted in exclusion, environmental hazards, and a hostile, degrading environment for Roma; and the commission asserted that this pattern of neglect contravenes the principles of equality, dignity, and the right to a healthy environment.

The commission called for immediate action from the City of Skopje to adapt its waste collection plans to the needs of the local population; expand the number of waste containers on the territory of Šutka; and to strengthen coordination and communication with the local municipality *"to ensure uninterrupted provision of public services and equal access to them for the population of this municipality."* The commission gave the City 30 days to act on the recommendations, and stipulated that if the City doesn't comply, the commission will initiate misdemeanour proceedings before a competent court. For more information [see here](#).

5 September 2023: No Water, No Sanitation, No Justice: The Fight to Get the Taps Running for Roma in Tenekje Maalo. For nearly 50 years, the Romani community living in the informal neighbourhood of Tenekje Maalo (Тенеџе Маало) in Kavadarci, North Macedonia have been living without legal access to drinking water, sanitation, or a clean environment. The community of over 300 people, the majority of which are children, have never had a connection to the municipal water mains, meaning none of their homes have a safe water source or sewerage provision. This is because of antigypsyism; the Municipality claims it is not possible to connect them as the neighbourhood is illegally constructed, despite agreements with an electricity provider (EVN Macedonia) proving this is not the case, and despite the Municipality offering no other legal option.

20 Bernard Rorke, *Unnatural Disaster: Environmental Racism and Europe's Roma*, Civil Rights Defenders. 2023. Available at: <https://crd.org/2023/04/08/report-unnatural-disaster-environmental-racism-and-europes-roma/>.

In April 2022, the Equality Body issued an Opinion finding direct discrimination based on ethnic affiliation, belonging to a marginalised group, social background, and property status in the area of access to public goods and services committed by the Municipality of Kavadarci against the Romani community living in Tenekje Maalo. The resulting recommendations were that the Municipality ensures access to clean water, sanitation, and clean environment for the neighbourhood. The Equality Body also recommended that in case of legal impediments concerning the legalisation of the neighbourhood, an interim solution should be found to ensure access to water to all residents' homes. The Municipality was given a six-month deadline to implement these recommendations.

23 August 2022: Authorities in the Municipality of Prilep were ordered to provide access to clean water for the Romani neighbourhoods of *Debarca* and *Tri Bagremi* in Prilep, North Macedonia. The Commission for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination found that the Municipality of Prilep and PUC Water and Sewerage Prilep had directly discriminated against Roma in the city by not ensuring equal access to water. The finding came after a complaint by the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) on behalf of Romani people from these communities. The public institutions have six months to implement the decision.

Despite having lived in those neighbourhoods for many years, these Romani communities were never connected to mains-supplied running water. Part of the reason is that many of the homes in these neighbourhoods have never been legalised by the municipality. The Commission's decision compels the authorities to circumvent obstacles regarding the legalisation of the neighbourhood, and provide temporary solutions that will provide all Romani families access to clean water. The decision issued by the Commission found direct discrimination on the basis of race, skin colour, ethnicity, social origin and property status in the area of access to goods and services. For more detail [see here](#).