



# Civil Society Forum

of the Western Balkans Summit Series



# “Acceptance and Social Inclusion of Minorities in the Western Balkans”

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## Civil Society & Think Tank Forum I

### Road to Berlin

June 01-02, 2021



Western  
Balkans  
Summit  
**Berlin**  
2021

Supported by:



Federal Foreign Office

The Roma are the largest ethnic minority in Europe, as well as one of the most disadvantaged and socially vulnerable groups. The livelihoods of the Roma in the Western Balkans is worse than in other parts of Europe due to many intersectional problems leading to a poor quality of life, limited access to basic rights and services, lack of economic opportunities, institutional and structural discrimination, and other deprivations that result in the exclusion of the Roma population from social welfare and development. Although there is no reliable data on the Roma population in the Western Balkans, many sources from international organizations as well as estimates from national organizations suggest that the share of Roma in the national populations of the Western Balkan countries varies from 1.98% in Bosnia and Herzegovina to approximately 9.7% in North Macedonia. Yet, these numbers are estimates due to a lack of updated census data in many of the Western Balkan countries.

Since 2004, regional initiatives led by different stakeholders, especially international organizations such as the Open Society Foundations and the World Bank, have emerged as a collective set of solutions to a pattern of Roma exclusion found across Western Balkan countries. The ‘Decade of Roma Inclusion’ 2005-2015 was the first regional step toward broader support of Roma communities in the Western Balkans. The Decade was an unprecedented political commitment by European governments to eliminate discrimination against Roma and close unacceptable welfare gaps between Roma and the rest of society. The Roma Decade focused on the priority areas of education, employment, health, and housing, and mandated that governments take into account other core issues of poverty, discrimination, and gender mainstreaming. The results of these decade-long efforts varied in each of the countries due to the political environment and will to include Roma. Yet, the biggest achievements during the decade were made in the area of education, while employment, housing, and health lagged in delivery of substantial results.

After 2015, National Roma Integration Strategies were created to continue the inclusion efforts for Roma in all European countries. Western Balkan countries followed suit with National Roma Strategies, setting the same priorities to advance the situation of Roma at the national level. Finally, the latest regional initiatives supported by Western Balkan leaders was the Poznan Declaration, a result of the Western Balkans Summit of the Berlin Process in 2019. The Poznan Declaration pledged to step up inclusion efforts as part of the EU integration of Western Balkan countries. Leaders pledged to continue and enhance efforts for the full equality and integration of Roma, notably through the implementation and follow up of the Joint Conclusions of the Roma Seminars. Similar to the National Roma Integration strategies, the Poznan Declaration focuses on the same pillars for inclusion to overcome social exclusion and ensure equality.

Despite international and regional support for initiatives to improve the situation of Roma between 2004 and 2019, there is a lack of supporting data and evidence-based research on Roma inclusion. Therefore, many of the policies and measures targeting Roma are inevitably unsustainable or fail. Impact is often vague and incomplete as strategies and declarations fail to define baseline indicators or how to operationalize objectives countries are required to meet.

Many international and national organizations are monitoring and evaluating state actions, policies, and measures toward the Roma communities in the Western Balkans. Various methodological attempts have been employed to generate data that might measure the progress made towards Roma inclusion. Yet, all of these strategies and documents have the same issues with the same approach which did not generate systematic results towards Roma inclusion. All of the documents for support generated some results which were then turned into state policies, while the rest were ad-hoc solutions which had to be supported by a donor or external funds. Often, Roma NGOs are service oriented entities replacing the role of the state in order to ensure better inclusion of the Roma

communities in the Western Balkans. Roma have endured more than 15 years of ongoing efforts by international and regional initiatives to encourage national governments to let them participate in and benefit from societal developments.

Regionally, data shows that the employment rate of Roma is still less than 25% and backsliding due to the COVID-19 crisis. There has also been no progress in the housing of Roma. In the EC progress reports for all Western Balkan countries, it is noted that the planned measures have not been implemented and Roma settlements are not included in the urban plans. In terms of education, the completion rate of compulsory education is approximately 51.5%, which is far behind the completion rate among non-Roma. Western Balkan countries also fail to meet the milestone of 95% coverage of Roma with health insurance. Regionally, only 63% of Roma are covered with health insurance. Civil registration is also still an open issue, especially for Roma in the region, as 9.3% of Roma are still unregistered in the Western Balkans. Hate speech and discrimination against Roma in the region has increased during the COVID-19 period, and more recently cases where police brutality is employed have been recorded in North Macedonia, Albania, and Serbia. It is also noted that the public budgeting related to Roma inclusion in the region has not increased and progress is fundamentally dependent on donor-driven initiatives.

### **Political participation**

Minority participation is a key concern to ensure human rights and equal opportunities for all members of a society. Minorities should have the right to have a say in formulating and implementing public policies, and to be represented by their political and community leaders. Minorities' participation in public life is a predominant indicator of whether or not a society ensures democratic, equal, and fair treatment of all citizens. The inclusion of minorities and their political parties in public life and decision-making is an important condition for ensuring democratic governance

and an open, functional, and pluralist society. Generally, laws in most Western Balkan countries guarantee the participation of minorities in decision making processes. However, census statistics are usually the basis for the share and level of participation of minorities in most of the countries that guarantee the right to minority participation in decision making. Provided that these statistics are also used for participation in the public administration, Roma remain underrepresented and their participation is extremely low.

Political participation generally depends on either an elected seat by votes or an appointed seat by the executive power. In terms of electing a representative to a seat, people have the right to decide who will represent them. The Western Balkan countries have different electoral models in which they implement elections. All of the countries conduct elections following a proportional model yet, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo have open list ballots, which provides greater opportunity for minorities to directly elect their candidate. However, North Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro, and Albania conduct elections with closed list ballots. In addition, every country differs in the number of constituencies and the formula for seats distribution. Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina employ the Sainte-Lague formula, while North Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro, and Albania use the D'hondt formula for seats' distribution. All of the countries have a threshold for parties to pass in order to be represented in parliament, and the thresholds vary from 3% to 5% in all of the countries. Serbia has introduced minority lists with no thresholds, while Montenegro also conducts elections with minority lists in which 0.7% of the votes have to be valid for 3 mandates for minorities. Kosovo implements elections in which a quota of 20 seats are dedicated for minorities. In North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Albania, minorities compete with majority parties in order to ensure a seat in the parliament.

With these models implemented in each of the countries, minority political representation is limited in many aspects. Roma in all Western Balkan countries struggle to ensure their voices are heard through representation in parliament.

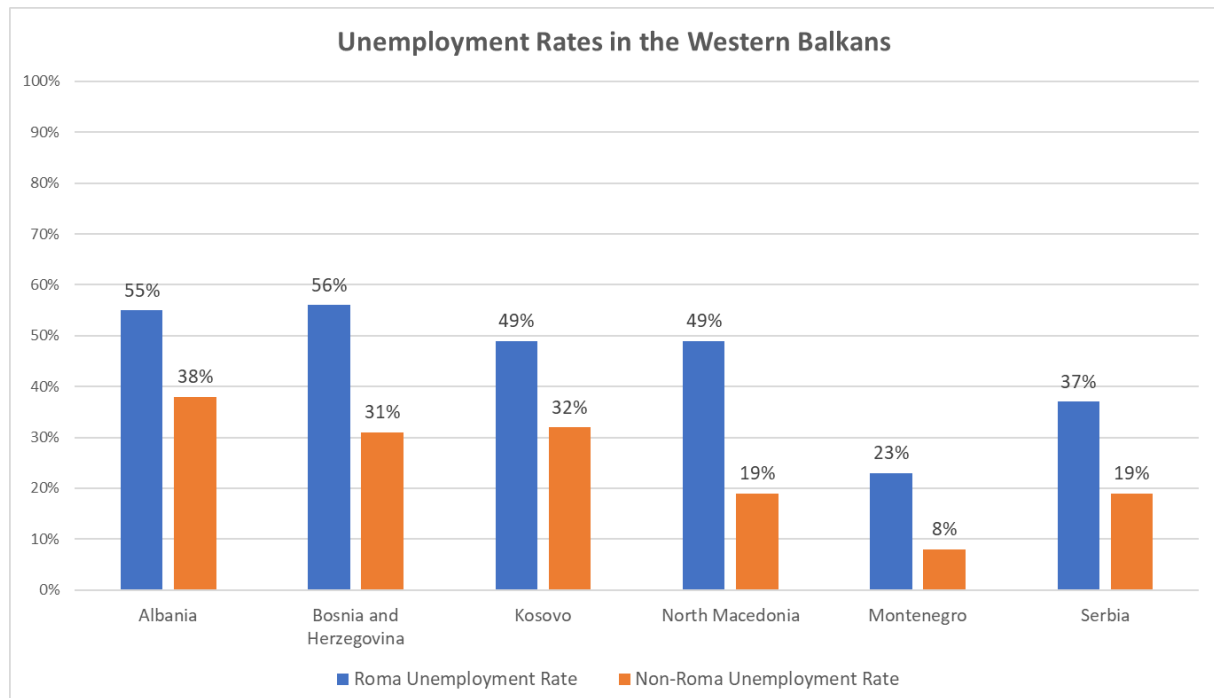
Although the share of the total population varies from 1.9% to 9%, in some Western Balkans countries there are Roma representatives, and in others Roma representation in parliament is lacking. In Kosovo, due to the quota seats, there are two Roma representatives, and some appointed seats. In North Macedonia, there is one Roma representative and counselors at the cabinets of the Prime Minister and the President of the country. In Albania, there are no elected Roma representatives; however, a counselor for national minorities was recently appointed. In Serbia, there are also no Roma MPs, but a Roma state secretary was recently appointed. Roma participation in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro is extremely low with no representatives or appointed managerial posts to Roma.

In principle, the Roma community is minimally present in the public decision-making due to limiting election models which favor majority political parties and the lack of political will by the executive power to include Roma in the decision-making processes through appointed

seats. During elections, majority parties form coalitions with minority parties in order to secure their influence in the legislature, while appointed seats are usually councilors or directors of public enterprises in order to satisfy the minimum requirement requested from the minority parties. Roma political participation in the Western Balkans rests heavily on the value of descriptive representation, meaning Roma want to be represented by Roma due to the mistrust of non-Roma representation. Thus, Roma political representation is not only needed to satisfy the minimum requirements, but rather to project the voice of the community in the decision-making processes.

### Employment

According to various sources confirmed by the UNDP in their 2017 Roma Regional Survey, when it comes to employment, Roma in the Western Balkans dramatically differ from the non-Roma population in their respective countries.



Source: Roma Regional Survey 2017

This data shows that in all of the Western Balkan countries Roma's unemployment rate is almost double in comparison to that of non-Roma. Acknowledging that this data is from

2017 and that the negative impact of COVID-19 on the Western Balkan economies is not yet fully known, the gap between the Roma and non-Roma unemployment rate is likely even

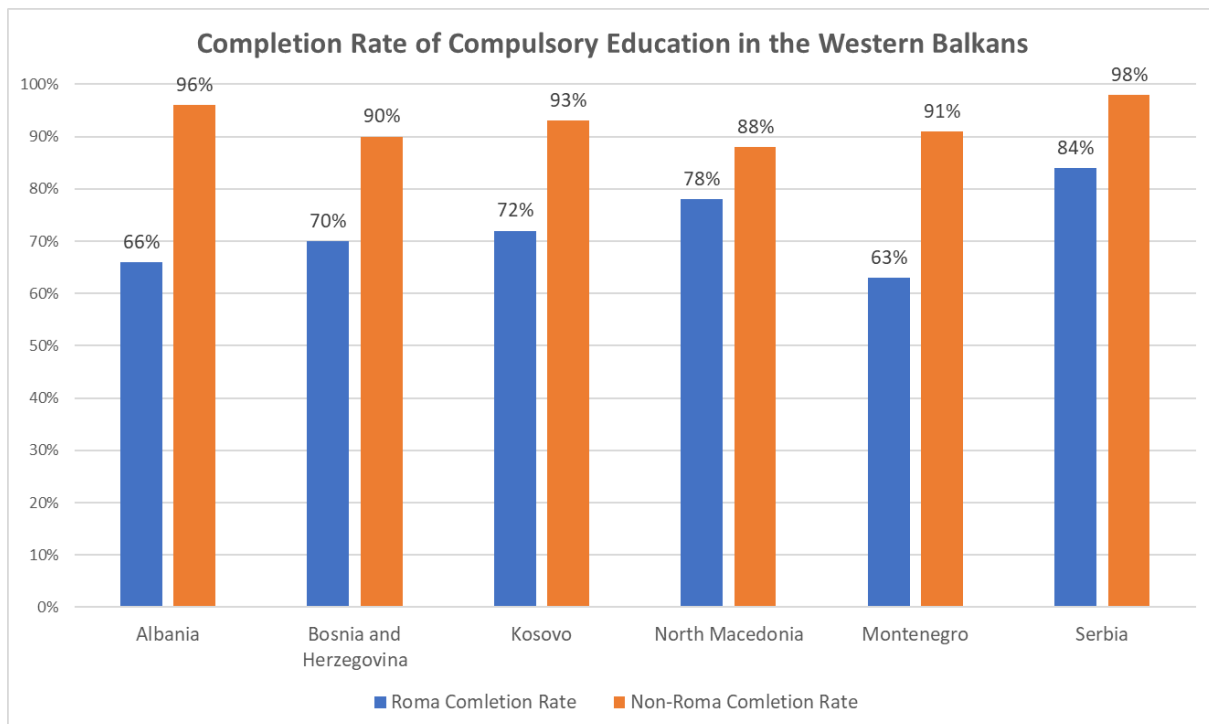
larger. One of the biggest deprivations that Roma faced during the pandemic, apart from equitable health care, is a gap of economic opportunity. Research evidence shows that Roma were among the first to be fired from their job when companies made layoffs due to the pandemic crisis. Roma are much less likely to participate in the labor market, and, if they do participate, they are less likely to be employed and more likely participate in the informal economic sector. Labor force participation of Roma in the Western Balkans has been an issue due to the low level of participation in the labor market compared to other European regions. Additionally, there has been a decline in the number of workers following changes in the age composition of the population. The population in the Western Balkans is aging fast due to the migration of the younger population to (mainly old) EU member states. Many working-age youth are devastated by the economic conditions and lacking employment opportunities, and decide to move to the EU to better situate themselves. An aging population has significant implications for the sustainability of social insurance, such as

pensions, health care, and eldercare systems, because there will be fewer workers contributing to social insurance schemes. In contrast to the aging general population in most Western Balkan countries, Roma are the youngest ethnic community living in the Western Balkans. Thus, the inclusion of Roma in the work force would be significant for employers and state development.

### Education

According to many studies and monitored indicators, education has been one of the successful pillars for Roma inclusion in the Western Balkans. Scholarships, tutoring, affirmative actions, and other measures have supported Roma to participate and complete their education. Although it is considered to be one of the more successful inclusion pillars,

data shows that there is still a large gap in the completion rates of compulsory education among Roma and non-Roma in the Western Balkan countries.



Source: Roma Regional Survey 2017

According to the data, Roma in all Western Balkan countries still have a lower completion rate of compulsory education compared to non-

Roma. Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, Roma children were attending in-person classes and education processes were implemented without

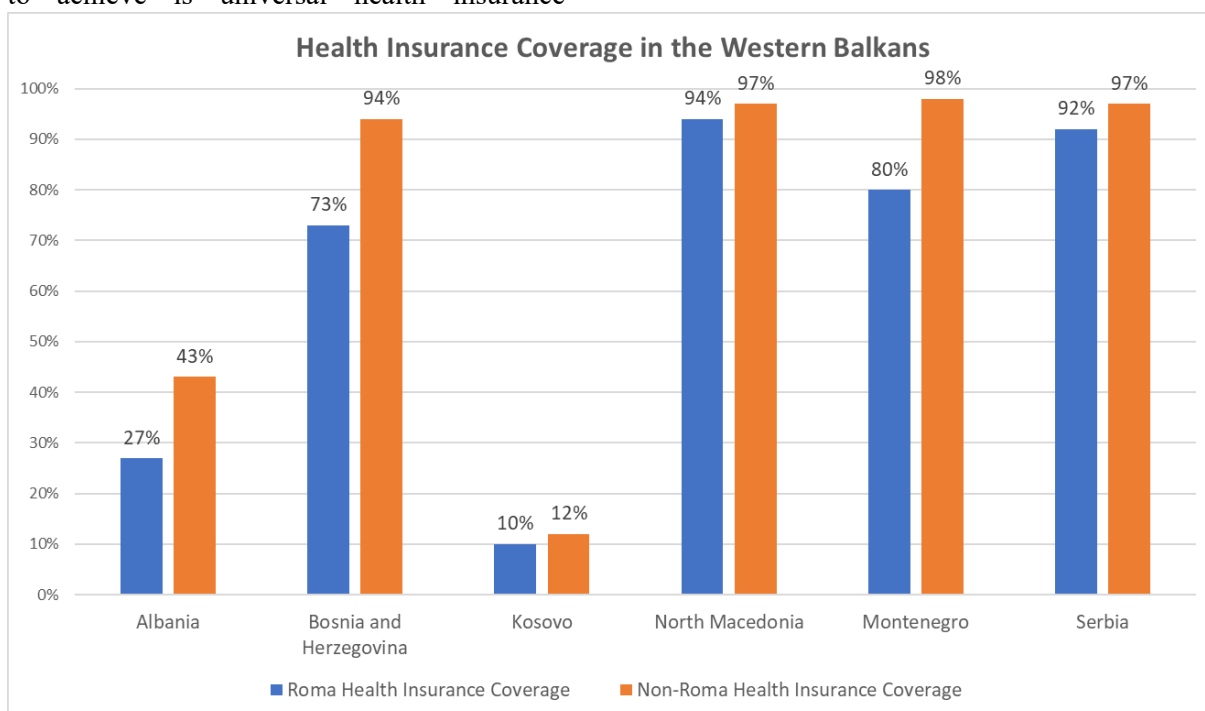
disruption. But since the COVID-19 crisis struck the Western Balkans, school-aged children, but especially Roma children, were negatively impacted due to the shift to distance-learning methods. Considering that COVID-19 broadly impacted the education process, the learning gap between Roma and non-Roma students is even bigger now since a lack of electronic or smart device ownership limits Roma students from joining remote classes. Additionally, living conditions are another element that burdens Roma children who attend online classes. Crowded homes are not favorable for any type of learning. Many have no computers at home or parents who can help them with their classes. Children typically attend only a few classes in school and cannot continue. There are a number of facilities and projects helping students whose learning is delayed or who lack the necessary means for online education. Having this burden in mind, Roma children attending classes are likely to fall behind in schools and high drop-out rates are expected as a direct outcome of the pandemic.

### Health

As part of the Poznan Declaration’s focus on health care, the indicator countries are working to achieve is universal health insurance

coverage for at least 95% of Roma or a rate equal to the rest of the population. However, data from the UNDP’s 2017 Roma Regional Survey shows that Roma are still behind the milestone of 95% or equal coverage across the Western Balkans.

This data demonstrates a regional failure to meet the health milestone outlined in the Poznan Declaration. The lowest of coverage of Roma in the Western Balkans is in Kosovo, while the highest coverage in the Western Balkans is in North Macedonia. Health insurance coverage is particularly low in Kosovo, mostly because there is no mandatory health insurance. The most common reason for low insurance coverage among Roma is the lack of information, differences in beliefs and attitudes about health care, and discrimination. Research evidence suggests that Roma face serious barriers in accessing healthcare. These barriers result from the lack of health insurance and other official documentation leading to the exclusion of Roma from health services, geographic isolation from quality care, lack of information, language and communication obstacles, direct discrimination, degrading treatment, and human rights violations in the provision of care.



Source: Roma Regional Survey 2017





In terms of access to healthcare, an important issue to raise is that Roma communities experienced higher rates of chronic disease and substantially lower life expectancy compared to non-Roma before the pandemic. The pandemic and associated measures adopted to contain it therefore impacted a population already suffering from a worse health status as compared to the general population. In this context, while disruptions of essential health services were reported by nearly all countries and affected entire populations, in several countries Roma communities, they appear to have been disproportionately impacted (in particular in Bosnia and Herzegovina).

### Recommendations:

- State statistical offices and ministries should segregate data in order to determine a baseline from which monitoring and evaluation of strategies of Roma inclusion can be employed.
  - Implement a proportional system with one constituency for the whole territory, with open lists without a threshold, as a model that better suits minorities and ensure their participation in times of elections.
  - Ruling parties should build coalitions with Roma parties and ensure positions in which Roma can participate in all decision-making processes.
  - Increase opportunities for employment that target the Roma work force and fully incorporate Roma in the labor markets.
  - Tailor measures and training in accordance to the market demands in order to maximize the potential of the working force in all of the countries.
  - Ensure Roma participation (with electronic devices) in distance learning classes to narrow the gap between Roma and non-Roma students in compulsory education.
  - Provide educational support for Roma children to encourage regular online participation in classes and tutoring so they do not miss content studied in class.
- Map and target Roma settlements for field visits in order to inform and educate the community about the importance of the health care insurance.
  - Sanctions for health institutions and personnel that discriminate Roma patients when they go for medical check-ups and services.

### Guiding questions:

- How do we make sure that the indicators from the strategies are met?
- Should the Poznan Declaration be operationalized in action plans and monitored by the CSOs?
- Should the EC evaluate the progress of the Poznan Declaration and require deadlines for activities?
- What are the best practices for formalization of businesses of Roma?
- How do we make sure that the Roma work force meets market demands?
- What is the best election model for minorities, especially for Roma in Western Balkans?
- Should Roma participate only in ethnic parties or in mainstream parties as well?
- How should Roma without smart devices attend online classes?
- What mechanisms should be introduced in order to improve the health care insurance of Roma?