

Conference Report

1st International Conference
of the Danube Labour Market Policy Platform for Roma Inclusion

Roma Empowerment for the Common Labour Market 20 Years of Successful Project Implementation in the Danube Region

Date: Thursday, Oct. 16th – Friday, Oct. 17th 2025

Venue: Marmorsaal (1st floor), Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection of the Republic of Austria ([Stubenring 1, 1010 Vienna, Austria](#))

The International Conference hosted by the Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection of Austria, focussing on the integration of Roma/Romnja and Sinti/Sintizze into the labour market of the Danube Region. The conference took place as part of the coordination of the Priority Area 9 “People and Skills” of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), and addressed crucial issues pertaining to labour market policies for the empowerment and integration of vulnerable groups, such as the Roma community, particularly in light of the challenges confronting Roma communities in the Danube Region.

Participants

A total of 88 participants attended the conference, from Austria, Romania, Montenegro, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Hungary, Republic of Kosovo, Serbia and Spain. Participants' background mainly included ministries of labour, ministries of social policy, ministries of education and other national policymakers, EU institutions and agencies, public administration, NGOs, private sector and educational institutions, practitioners, researchers and experts.

Moderation

The conference was moderated by **Žaklina Radosavljević** from the *Vivaro - Viva Romnja* Association*, based in Vienna, Austria.

Introduction

The conference commenced with a musical performance by **Branko Bako Jovanović** and **Zika Jovanović**.

Roland Hanak (*Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection, Austria*) welcomed H.E. Petre-Florin Manole, Minister of Labour, Family, Youth and Social Solidarity, Romania as well as all speakers and participants of the conference on behalf of H.E. Korinna Schumann, Federal Minister of Labour, Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection, Austria, and introduced the video message of H.E. Korinna Schumann. In his opening speech, he elaborated on the three main occasions for the conference:

- 20 years: “European Parliament Resolution on the Situation of the Roma in the EU” and “Thara Projects of Volkshilfe Austria”
- 15 years: “European Union Roma Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion and Participation” and Inclusion of Vulnerable Groups within the “Danube Region Strategy” 10 years: “Roma Empowerment for the Labour Market” Programmes and Projects in Austria, co-financed also by the European Social Fund (ESF).

He pointed out the good cooperation throughout the years with the representatives of the projects and initiatives aimed to promote the labour market integration of Roma.

Opening of the Conference

Korinna Schumann (*Federal Minister of Labour, Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection, Austria*) addressed the participants via video message and was pleased to open the conference. She warmly welcomed distinguished guests, including H.E. Petre-Florin Manole, Minister of Labour, Family, Youth and Social Solidarity, Romania, Emmerich Gärtner-Horvath, Chairman of the Roma Ethnic Group Advisory Council of Austria, representatives from Austria's Roma community, and European institutions. She emphasised her vision for a labour market where people, regardless of background or ethnicity, have equal opportunities and are free from discrimination, and where diversity is seen as a great potential for our society and economy. She acknowledged ongoing discrimination against Roma both when seeking employment and at their place of employment, but also highlighted the achievements of ten years of projects and initiatives financed by her ministry aimed at empowering the Roma community in Austria's labour market, thanking all involved partners. Finally, she encouraged participants to use the conference to share experiences and ideas, stressing that only together a truly inclusive labour market can be achieved.

Petre-Florin Manole (*Minister of Labour, Family, Youth and Social Solidarity, Romania*) greeted all participants and expressed his gratitude for the invitation and the opportunity to open the conference alongside H.E. Korinna Schumann, Federal Minister of Labour, Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection, Austria. He pointed out the good diplomatic relations between Romania and Austria throughout the years and praised the initiative to dedicate this conference to the crucial topic of labour market integration, with a focus on the Roma community. Looking back on his years as a Roma activist, Petre-Florin Manole acknowledged the struggles that Roma are facing when seeking employment, while at the same time reassuring that great achievements are possible too, as he himself has come to learn. More broadly, Petre-Florin Manole highlighted the importance of well-functioning and fair labour markets for all citizens that are adaptive to substantial changes and developments. He also underscored the role of Romanian workers in Austria, especially in the nursing and care sector.

Danijela Cicvarić (*Managing Director, Romano Centro - Roma Association Vienna, Austria*) welcomed all colleagues and participants and reiterated the importance of the conference for creating a better understanding in society for the struggles rooted in discrimination that Roma are facing in the world of work, but also for showcasing the efforts and successful work of her colleagues active in the field of labour market integration. Danijela Cicvarić illustrated these struggles with a concrete example from her surroundings: She told the story of a young woman who applied for an apprenticeship for and, after a successful trial period, was confident that she would be accepted. Shortly after her future superior learned that the young woman is Roma, she was informed that she did not get the job. Against this backdrop, targeted support from social workers and mediators from within the Roma community is all the more important.

Erich Fenninger (*Managing Director, Volkshilfe Austria*) greeted all participants and commended the initiative, with this conference, to on one hand look back on the meaningful work in the area of labour market integration and Roma empowerment in Austria, and on the other to create opportunities for mutual learning and developing new ideas. Erich Fenninger highlighted the vast experience that Volkshilfe Austria has gathered over the years from implementing their “Thara” projects, and would rather let their many success stories speak for themselves in a brief

retrospective through the past two decades of their work, as was illustrated by the short highlight video that they prepared.

Keynote Speeches

Sabrina Steindl-Kopf (*University of Vienna, Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology*) focused in her presentation on the importance of Roma empowerment projects and initiatives for the Austrian labour market. The Austrian Roma community has an estimated population of 25,000 to 50,000 persons, the majority of whom have migration experience and live in the Vienna area. In her presentation, Sabrina Steindl-Kopf highlighted the distinction between autochthonous Roma groups (such as Burgenland-Roma, Lovara, Kalderash, and Sinti), who are recognised as a "Volksgruppe" (national minority) and thus receive special funding and representation, and allochthonous, migrant Roma communities, which are excluded from this status.

Sabrina Steindl-Kopf pointed out that the success of projects supporting the labour market integration of Roma is shown to rely on incorporating Roma as project managers, as they are viewed as experts, are trusted by their communities, and understand the complex realities of their clients. Essential elements for effective Roma empowerment strategies include ensuring trust and attention to the communities' perspectives, constructive cooperation between funders and project leaders, and building sustainable measures.

Sabrina Steindl-Kopf's presentation is available via this [link](#).

Jaroslav Kling (*European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Equality, Inclusion and Sustainability Unit*) presented key data from the [FRA Roma surveys](#) on employment trends in the countries of the Danube Region covered in the surveys, highlighting progress and persistent challenges against the goals of the [EU Roma Framework](#).

With regard to employment rates, the data show that in 2024 more Roma were in paid work compared to previous results from 2016, 2019 and 2021, with the EU-level target of at least 60% of Roma in paid work by 2030 potentially achievable. Key factors influencing paid work status include sex, age, disability, Roma density, and at-risk-of-poverty status. Focusing on the gender aspect, Jaroslav Kling pointed out that, while the employment rate of Roma women has increased in 2024, so has the gender employment gap for Roma. The rate of young Roma (16-24 years) Not in Employment, Education, or Training (NEET) has decreased over time. However, the gender gap persists among Roma youth, with more young Roma women being NEET. The EU target aims for fewer than one in three Roma youth to be NEET by 2030.

Jaroslav Kling mentioned discrimination experience and job quality as main hurdles towards successful labour market integration of Roma. A notable percentage of Roma reported feeling discriminated against when looking for a job or while at work. Roma are disproportionately represented in elementary occupations (e.g., cleaners, construction workers), and a significant share of Roma report working without a (permanent) contract.

Jaroslav Kling's presentation is available via this [link](#).

Panel Discussion:

Challenges and Opportunities of Roma Empowerment Projects and Initiatives for a Better Inclusion into the Common Labour Market

Szabolcs Schmidt (*Head of Unit, Non-Discrimination: Anti-Racism and Roma Coordination, Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, European Commission*) pointed out that, while progress is being registered in the area of labour market integration, there is still significant need for improvement, with around 70% of Roma currently living in poverty. He argued that in this context, the discussion should revolve around inclusion rather than integration, and that society must change its approach toward antigypsyism. While the new EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation is already working towards these goals, he called for the need to intensify the efforts to raise awareness of structural racism within society.

Zuzana Havírová (*European Roma Grassroots Organisations (ERGO) Network*) emphasised that the participation of the Roma community is crucial in order to have success with implementing projects, counteracting segregation and producing change. She argued that participation must start from the beginning, during the planning and drafting phase, and that Roma representatives must have a seat at the table when speaking about policy. In this regard, she mentioned the involvement of Roma organisations and experts in the Czech Republic and Slovakia in the development of their respective national Roma strategies as good practices for participation. Finally, she pointed out the importance of quality social services, inclusive education, and the need for regional employment to work on creating inclusive spaces for Roma employees.

Raúl Pérez González (*International Department, Fundación Secretariado Gitano (FSG), Spain*) acknowledged that the Roma community has a history of discrimination and social exclusion, with a striking 86% of young Roma living in Spain leaving school early as an indication of the struggles they encounter. FSG has been advocating for the economic and social rights of Roma for over forty years, and towards this goal has been implementing a successful ESF project with a strong intercultural approach for 25 years, emphasising the need for long-term targeted measures to counteract high levels of unemployment and poverty, and years of discrimination and segregation. This project focuses on the salaried employment of Roma, being a core feature setting up strong cooperation with the public employment service and also with companies, thus facilitating the social inclusion of Roma. This employment project has inspired similar approaches from the FSG towards supporting young Roma to finish compulsory education (the Promociona programme) and increasing the equality of Roma women (the Calí programme).

Jaroslav Kling (*European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Equality, Inclusion and Sustainability Unit*) argued that discrimination is the worst manifestation of antigypsyism and that it is within the responsibilities of governments to take these issues seriously. In the labour market, discrimination stems from a lack of understanding and fear of the unknown, which is why it is essential to raise awareness among the general population and employers about unacceptable discriminatory practices. As a fundamental European value, he calls for the rule of law to be applied against all discriminatory practices.

Emmerich Gärtner-Horvath (*Chairman, Roma Ethnic Group Advisory Council of Austria*) drew upon personal experience to illustrate the struggles that Roma are facing on the Austrian labour market. He reminisced about his parents who, despite being illiterate and not being able to support their children with their education, supported the family through honest work. As a young man, he was rejected from an apprenticeship, leading to him having to pursue an apprenticeship in his brother's company. Also, he mentioned that in the late 1980s a company requested that the public employment service does not recommend any Roma for filling their vacancies. Since then, Roma empowerment has come a long way in Austria, with the Roma Dialogue Platform and several Roma associations being founded and offering various social support services and trainings. The recognition of Roma as an official minority in Austria in 1993 represents another key milestone. Against this backdrop, he emphasised the importance of community work and public outreach to continue raising awareness for the Roma community.

Sabrina Steindl-Kopf (*University of Vienna, Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology*) reiterated that the Roma as a whole have limited access to quality education and face prejudice and discrimination on the labour market, but that Roma women are even more affected by these struggles. She pointed out that due to their disadvantaged status within the community, Roma women and generally young women from migrant communities have particular needs that require more intense support from society. Specifically, she argued that safe spaces must be created for empowering Roma women, and targeted support in terms of family work, assistance with educational pursuits and childcare is essential.

Working Group 1: Roma Empowerment Projects – The Key to Success for the Common Labour Market

Usnija Buligovic (*Volkshilfe Austria*) focused in her presentation on the project „*THARA E butjako zutimako Kher - Labour Market Counselling Centre*“ and outlined success factors for Roma empowerment in the labour market. She argued that the main obstacles are structural, not cultural, and the project thus aims to shift the client focus towards long-term stability and future perspective. Key success factors involve building trust through personal encounters instead of relying on prejudice, and providing accessible education and qualification that is practical, flexible, and supported by language and financial assistance. Furthermore, the approach stresses the need for integrating Roma into the project design and implementation, and maintaining flexible methods to adapt to the community's changing needs.

Usnija Buligovic's presentation is available via this [link](#).

Danijela Cicvarić (*Romano Centro - Roma Association Vienna, Austria*) presented the project „*BARUVAS KETHANE! Grow Together!*“ and highlighted the importance of a holistic approach to address the high unemployment rate among the diverse Roma community in Austria. The key obstacles were identified as structural barriers such as low education, inadequate language and IT skills, and precarious social/economic situations. The project's success factors include adaptability and orientation to living conditions (flexible, needs-based counselling and social work), the comprehensive expertise of qualified staff regarding the diverse Roma groups and human rights, and the use of personal strengths like humour and hospitality to build trust with the clients. Finally, the approach incorporates a critical perspective to challenge traditional gender roles and patriarchal structures, especially concerning career choices.

Danijela Cicvarić's presentation is available via this [link](#).

Working Group 2: Roma Empowerment Projects – The Key to Success for the Common Labour Market

Jelena Zlojutro (*Volkshochschule (Adult Education Centre) Brigittenau Vienna, Austria*) focused in her input on the project „*AMARO DROM - Our Path*“ that aims to strengthen the labour market integration of Roma, particularly those with low qualifications, poor educational backgrounds, and facing language barriers. She pointed out that the core strategy involves several activities ranging from individual counselling and coaching to job application support, and building company networks for job matching, while also conducting awareness-raising events for professionals. Key insights from the project highlighted that specialised individual counselling is the crucial element for social participation and labour market entry, with trust being the primary success factor.

Jelena Zlojutro's presentation is available via this [link](#).

Eva Schwarzmayer and **Lisa-Marie Horvath** (*Trendwerk Oberwart, Austria*) presented the project „*O DROM ANDI CUKUNFT - The Path to the Future*“ addressing specifically Roma in the Austrian federal state of Burgenland. The main goals of the project are the development of long-term professional perspectives and the support of sustainable (re-)entry into the labour market. The project, which covers job placement in various fields like healthcare, construction, and gastronomy, is highly valued by participants, who reported gaining new communication skills, career motivation, and positive perspectives for the future.

Eva Schwarzmayer and Lisa Marie Horvath's presentation is available via this [link](#).

Alexander Gerganov (*Centre for the Study of Democracy, Bulgaria*) provided in his presentation evidence and policy perspectives on the labour market integration of Roma in Bulgaria and the Danube Region, based on his own studies and policy work. The core findings highlighted that interventions are hampered by fragmented policies, low trust in institutions, and a lack of data-driven design. To overcome these obstacles and effectively integrate vulnerable groups like Roma youth NEETs, he called for the development of data-based and differentiated employment programmes, Roma-led outreach and mediation, and the integration of anti-discrimination

measures into employment services. Additionally, he also stressed the importance of regional learning through partnerships like the COOPOWER consortium. Alexander Gerganov's presentation is available via this [link](#).

Conclusions

Roland Hanak (*Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection, Austria*) thanked the speakers for their inspiring contributions and all participants for their engagement, and reiterated the need and importance of continuing to support work on the social inclusion and labour market integration of the Roma community. He was pleased to invite everyone to the dinner reception that was musically accompanied by Branko Bako Jovanović and Zika Jovanović and looked forward to an insightful second conference day.

Day 2, Friday, 17th October 2025

Interactive Project Visits

The following eleven projects, aimed at promoting the labour market integration of Roma, prepared information stands to present their work:

- „THARA E butjako zutimako Kher“ (*“Labour Market Counselling Centre” Project, Volkshilfe Austria*)
- „O DROM ANDI CUKUNFT“ (*“The Path to the Future” Project, Trendwerk Oberwart, Austria*)
- „BARUVAS KETHANE!“ (*“Grow Together!” Project, Romano Centro – Roma Association Vienna, Austria*)
- „BICINPE!“ (*“Roma Empowerment for the Retail Sector” Project, BFI Vienna, Austria*)
- „OPRE ROM*NJA! Tumaro Drom“ (*“Let’s go! Your Path” Project, Itworks, Austria*)
- „EMRO u drom zi buti“ (*“The Path to Work” Project, Caritas Styria, Austria*)
- „AMARO DROM“ (*“Our Path” Project, VHS Brigittenau Vienna, Austria*)
- „Arselem“ (*“Arriving” Project, Caritas Salzburg, Austria*)
- *“ROMA Empowerment: Introducing Young Roma to the Austrian Labour Market” Project, lpcenter.at, Austria*
- „BUDI“ (*“Work” Project, Newo Ziro Association, Austria*)
- *“Step by Step to Employment” ESF Project, P.G.D.I. Project of Civic Democratic Initiative, Croatia*

Working Group 3: Roma Empowerment Projects – The Key to Success for the Common Labour Market

Simon Bordt (*Newo Ziro Association, Austria*) presented the project *“BUDI - Work”* that aims to facilitate the labour market integration and empowerment of the Sinti community in Austria. The project is contextualised by the historical reality that trauma and mistrust of authorities after the Holocaust, alongside a tradition of successful self-employment, led to lower formal education and the continued existence of high barriers to accessing higher education for the Sinti community. This has created a skills gap where the increasing demands of the labour market clash with a relatively static educational level within the community. Another obstacle is the historical lack of professional networks within the Sinti community. In Austria, many opportunities – such as internships, job offers or mentors for professional development – arise primarily through personal contacts. This makes access to companies and career opportunities even more difficult, even when skills and motivation are present. The project's core strategy is based on three pillars: individual and culturally-sensitive guidance, followed by networking with relevant institutions and educational providers, and establishing practical partnerships with businesses to create pathways for employment and career development.

Simon Bordt's presentation is available via this [link](#).

Nenad Vladisavljev (*Association of Roma Students, Serbia*) focused in his input on lessons learned from working with the most marginalised Roma in Serbia towards labour market integration, and argued that traditional active employment policy measures are ineffective for the most marginalised. Instead, the most successful model relies on continuous support and mentorship from Roma employment advisors who act as role models to build trust and self-confidence. Furthermore, he emphasised the power of group support and the critical need for cultural and economic sensitivity, particularly by ensuring financial compensation during training to offset the loss of informal survival income. Finally, he raised an urgent policy issue: the risk that waste management reforms in Serbia and other Western Balkan countries could eliminate the main income of thousands of Roma who rely on collecting raw/scrap materials, potentially pushing them to seek asylum within the EU. The learnings are summarised in an own handbook illustrating the methodology used for promoting labour market integration of marginalised Roma.

Nenad Vladisavljev's presentation is available via this [link](#).

Ana Savanović and **Višnja Šamadan**, (*P.G.D.I Project of Civic Democratic Initiative, Croatia*) outlined in their presentation the ESF-funded project "*Step by Step to Employment*" that was implemented between 2020 and 2022 in Croatia and focused on supporting the social inclusion and employment of marginalised groups, including Roma. The project faced implementation challenges, including delays due to COVID-19 and difficulties in recruiting and motivating participants for active engagement in the mentoring phases. Despite these difficulties, key results included the employment of beneficiaries, strengthening their mental and social status, increasing their awareness of rights, and ultimately improving their overall quality of life.

Ana Savanović and Višnja Šamadan's presentation is available via this [link](#).

Conclusions

Roland Hanak (*Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection, Austria*) thanked all speakers and guests for their active involvement and looked back on two successful days full of inspiring findings and stories. These two days have shown once more the need to keep working on alleviating the complex issues and struggles faced by the Roma community, and motivate to do so. He emphasised the very good long-standing cooperation with partners in Austria and the Danube Region and expressed his gratitude for their continuous efforts to improve the situation of the Roma community in the region.