Europe has over 12 million Roma. About six million of them live in the European Union (EU) and just over three quarters live in extreme poverty. Denying the right to a decent life, for at least 4.5 million EU citizens, is not just a matter of social rights, but also a question of how the EU treats its most important resource – its people. Roma are a young population – indeed, 40 per cent are children and adolescents. If member states can ensure equal access to quality services, including early childhood development and education services, health, housing, and employment, just imagine the positive difference this investment could make! Not only would the Roma improve their lives, but it would also allow them to contribute fully to the future of the EU and the countries in which they live.

In this context, the EU and its member states must be aware, finally, of the potential of the Romani contribution to the future of the European project, to its social and economic development. For example, the good health of the Romani population and access to quality education and infrastructure (clean drinking water, adequate public transport to rural areas and information technology connectivity) are essential preconditions for the full participation of Roma in the social life and labour market of their country. Take the example of
Romani workers in the factories and farms of many Western European countries. They are playing a key role in supporting the economies of these counties, even if for many of them, the working conditions are not so friendly. Sometimes, their salaries are not, at all, expressing the value of the amount of work they do every single day. They live in overcrowded rented houses, two or three families, with children, struggling in a foreign country for a better life. They are not so visible, but they are some of the heroes of our day.

To make the equal treatment of Romani people a reality, there is a strong need for a post-2020 EU Strategic Framework for the Equality, Inclusion and Participation of people with Romani background, with a binding character for the member states in terms of Romani inclusion goals to be reached. Political support when racism against different minority groups is rising sharply is a key point for the inclusion of Romani people. Major mobilization of key stakeholders in exploring the opportunities around the upcoming EU presidencies is needed to ensure political commitment for a post-2020 potential binding policy. Following this approach, adequate funding would be allocated and it could lead to a more successful implementation of the national strategies or action plans, especially at regional and local levels. The EU must link its political and financial priorities to priorities regarding the inclusion of people with Romani background. When local and national budgets are developed, the inclusion of people with Romani background will be among the priorities. More efficient and strengthened monitoring and oversight mechanisms must be developed, and the European Commission and member states must ensure that the funds allocated are properly spent and not misused if the strategic framework is to deliver on its goals.

To achieve this in an effective way, the European Commission and the member states must move from the paternalistic (top to bottom) approach mainly used for the development of the current framework, to the non-paternalistic one. A bottom-up
approach would allow people with Romani background to participate more effectively in policymaking at all levels; local and regional stakeholders (non-governmental organizations, activists, experts, community members and so on) must also be involved in the development, implementation and monitoring of the post-2020 public policies towards people with Romani background. Considering the non-paternalistic approach, the post-2020 EU Strategic Framework for the Equality, Inclusion and Participation of people with Romani background could be developed based on more reliable quantitative and qualitative data; future strategies would be based on the latest available information since access to a larger number of communities and considerable sources of solutions for the improvement of the Romani situation would be broader than in 2011. These data must be the basis of detailed and realistic action plans, with a realistic and adequate predefined budget included into the national, regional and local budgets according to the magnitude of the social inclusion needs of people with Romani background.

However, COVID-19 has shown, very clearly, the failure of the governments within the EU to treat Romani people as equal citizens. It has shown that persistent and structural antigypsyism continues to exist at all levels of European society, and manifests itself on a daily basis.

Under lockdowns, many Romani people suffer disproportionately. Besides the lack of access to potable drinking water, food or sanitation equipment to keep them safe from infection, Romani men, women and children were brutally beaten and abused by police forces, especially in Eastern European countries, such as Romania, Bulgaria and Slovakia. Moreover, they also became the targets of xenophobic rumours and conspiracies in countries such as Spain, singling them out as the transmitters of the COVID-19 virus.

Racism is not the ‘solution’ to this crisis; we need to be supportive. The virus does not care about wealth, poverty or ethnicity; it can hit everyone. When it does, if we do not
make sure we protect the most vulnerable among us, it can be lethal, not just for those infected, but for an entire community.

This is why the EU and its member states cannot afford to lose more time and play with human lives by legitimizing the work on the inclusion of people with Romani background through a soft policy like the 2011–20 EU Roma Framework. Member states must officially recognize antigypsyism as a specific form of racism against people with a Romani background, and to develop and implement specific and effective preventive and corrective measures against it on all levels where it occurs.

Unfortunately, antigypsyism is one of the oldest forms of racism in European history, from the time of slavery in Romania to the Holocaust and present day. The majority societies must know our history, and our traditions and culture, before judging us. We have been citizens of our countries for centuries. Many of our people fought in wars and defended the integrity of our countries, while many were murdered during the Holocaust because of their ethnicity. Yet, this part of our history and our contribution to our countries’ development is not properly acknowledged in school curricula. We need to raise awareness about this, and the EU and its member states can play an important role in this matter.

Antigypsyism has kept Roma in deep poverty. Today, this is still a taboo subject for the EU and many European countries. Antigypsyism is one of the main obstacles for equal participation and inclusion of people with a Romani background. Without a horizontal approach against antigypsyism in all domains of public life, we cannot speak about a real change and successful inclusion process.

This is why we need to urgently call on the European Commission to develop a proposal for a post-2020 EU Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion and Participation of people with Romani background in Europe, putting the fight against poverty and antigypsyism at the forefront. The proposal must include: clear and binding objectives, measures and targets for the member states; a clear timeline and clear and binding
progress requirements, as well as success indicators and adequate funding for its implementation; and a robust monitoring and oversight mechanism to ensure effective implementation and appropriate use of funds. Equal participation in all domains of public life, political participation and the language, arts, culture, history and environmental injustice of people with Romani background should be explicitly mentioned in the proposal for a post-2020 EU public policy, with additional measures to the four main priority areas of education, employment, housing and healthcare.

However, this cannot be done in solitude. It requires a joint effort of people with a Romani background across Europe. The power of numbers speaking with the same voice towards the achievement of a common goal must be a priority of our communities and its leadership – *Opre Roma* (Roma Arise)!