INSECURE AND DEPRIVED HOUSING CONDITIONS OF THE ROMA
IN THE CONTEXT OF HOUSING CRISES IN EUROPE
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Enikő Vincze, professor on sociology at Babeș-Bolyai University, and
political activist for housing justice in Cluj-Napoca, Romania
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During the decade following the 2008 global financial crises, international organizations such as the European Commission, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund recognized the persistence of housing crises across the world, including the European Union. They could observe that the rates of financial burden of the total housing costs were unevenly distributed among the EU Member States; that the housing cost overburden rate was exceptionally high among people at risk of poverty, but it was also worrying among households who are renting their home from the market and among homeowners with mortgages. In the majority of the countries, the residential property prices and private rents continue to rise year by year,[1] while the purchasing power of the population stagnates or decreases. The yearly reports of FEANTSA on housing exclusion in Europe show that the number of homeless people is also continually growing across countries. For example, in England, since 2010, it grew with 169% and in Ireland, since 2014, with 145%. [2] More than 11 million homes sit empty, while there are 4.1 million homeless people across Europe. [3] Report of the Fundamental Rights Agency reflects that many Roma and Travelers in the EU have to live in informal settlements without basic infrastructure; very often Roma housing areas have poor access to water, electricity or gas supply, and as well as to public services, employment and schools; and impoverished Roma continue to be subjected to residential segregation and forced evictions.[4] The OSCE ODIHR director's statement regarding Hungary in 2015 should be kept on the agenda in all the cases when the life of the Roma are threatened by evictions and inadequate housing conditions: "In the provision of social housing, the authorities must adhere to OSCE commitments prohibiting discrimination, and to international human rights standards on the right to adequate housing."

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[1] For example, the percentage change in 2017 compared to 2016 was as follows: EU-28: 4.6%, Euro Area countries: 4.3%, Germany: 6.1%, Ireland: 10.9%, Portugal: 9.2%, Romania: 6%, data extracted from *Eurostat databases*, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/housing-price-statistics

[2] *Third overview of housing exclusion in Europe*, a joint publication of FEANTSA and Abbé Pierre Foundation, 2018

[3] https://www.scmp.com/news/world/article/1434283/shame-europes-11m-empty-homes-41m-homeless-people

[4] FRA, *Housing conditions of Roma and Travellers in the European Union - Comparative report*, 2009, https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2011/housing-conditions-roma-and-travellers-european-union-comparative-report

In Romania, similar to other CEE countries, housing politics after 1990 played an essential role in the transformation of actually existing socialism into neoliberal capitalism. Processes of privatization via the right-to-buy and the retrocession measures, paralleled by the lack of public investment in public housing, resulted in the over-commodification and financialization of housing. Housing became a commodity and a financial asset, peoples' right to housing is violated and their social need for housing remains unsatisfied. This is related precisely to how urban and housing development serves the interests of capital and not of people, and definitely not of low-income people. In the case of the Roma, general political economy processes resulting in different types of housing deprivations are intersected with institutional racism and discrimination. The intersectionality of several factors makes that the extreme forms of housing dispossession, like forced eviction, homelessness, living in inadequate and insecure homes, or being enforced into housing arrangements in toxic environments harshly disconnected from the rest of the localities are disproportionally affecting impoverished Roma.

Acknowledging the realities from above, experts and activists position themselves in divergent explanatory paradigms:

- According to some,[5] the solution to these problems lies in making the housing market more efficient, in mobilizing private companies and public-private partnerships, and in facilitating the latter's access to public funds. In this paradigm, the aim is to produce – on the one hand – affordable housing for middle class people who cannot afford purchasing or renting homes at market price, and – on the other hand – social housing for the poor. Eventually, such solutions re-enforce the privatization of public housing and housing financialization.

- According to others,[6] the current housing crises can be solved through the creation of substantial public and non-profit housing stock under social control, alongside with

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[5] See for example some recent diagnosis and initiatives: *Living and leaving: Housing, Mobility and Welfare in the European Union*, World Bank, 2018 (https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eca/publication/living-and-leaving); *EUInvest Program* (https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/what_is_investeu_mff_032019.pdf); *Housing Partnership Final Action Plan,* EU Urban Agenda, 2018 (https://ec.europa.eu/futurium/en/housing/housing-partnership-final-action-plan).

[6] Among them the European Action Coalition for the Right to Housing and to the City (https://housingnotprofit.org/), the Romanian coalition Block for Housing (https://bloculpentrulocuire.ro/), and the Social Housing NOW! movement from Cluj-Napoca (https://casisocialeacum.ro/). In the past year, the Block for Housing elaborated a report on forced evictions in Romania (https://bloculpentrulocuire.ro/2019/04/19/raport-asupra-evacuarilor-fortate-2008-2017/), and a guide for preventing them (https://bloculpentrulocuire.ro/category/analize-si-demersuri-politice/anti-evacuare/); a statement regarding some recent measures proposed in Romania for the legalization of informal settlements (https://bloculpentrulocuire.ro/category/analize-si-demersuri-politice/locuire-informala/); and a call to the European Parliament https://bloculpentrulocuire.ro/2019/03/01/call-upon-candidates-running-for-the-european-parliament-public-social-housing-priority-of-the-european-parliament-agenda-for-2019-2023/).

stopping the accumulation of homeownership in the hands of investment funds and real estate developers. Only such politics would be able to assure housing as a universal human right and to turn the fulfillment of the housing needs of low-income people into a high priority.

In addition to the Roma-related commitments expressed in the OSCE Action Plan in what regards housing I would like to make the following recommendations:

1) The problems of the insecure and deprived housing conditions of the Roma should be solved in the context of a broader policy change in the domain of housing. This requires the accountability of the states regarding the **assurance of housing as a universal human right by means of public and non-profit housing.** Moreover, this required change should also impose the implementation of affirmative measures on behalf of the most deprived social categories, among them Roma. The latter has to include:

   o **the legal prohibition of forced evictions**, i.e., of the evictions that leave people without adequate alternative housing, and

   o **compulsory social measures that accompany the legalization of informal settlements in order to safeguard those who might be affected negatively by the latter**.

2) Housing justice should not be placed solely on human rights matters, anti-discrimination legislation, and social policies, because it is also dependent on economic and fiscal policies. Therefore, housing justice requires changes in all policy domains in an interconnected manner. On the one hand, **housing justice for all requires ending market fundamentalism (that results in the super-commodification, privatization and financialization of housing.** On the other hand, **housing justice requires eradicating institutional racism, which maintains unevenness in the access to adequate housing on the detriment of marginalized and stigmatized people, among them the Roma.**

   Otherwise, it might happen that in parallel with the general rhetoric of human rights, the realities of housing development will continue to support the real estate investors and the better-off white middle class, while denying the access to adequate housing of the pauperized and racialized working class, including impoverished Roma.

3) Turning our attention towards Europe, one should note that even though housing policy is considered a matter reserved to the EU Member States, the European Union has a substantial impact on national housing policies. This impact is mainly due to its competition and state aid rules and to the fiscal surveillance mechanism of the European Semester. Nevertheless, the responsibility of the EU in the domain of housing also rests with the fact that the provisions of the European Social Model exist only in the form of soft recommendations made to the Member States.

   In this context, OSCE should promote the idea that **there is a need to change housing politics at different scales in order to guarantee housing rights and justice for the Roma: from the local, through the national, to transnational (including EU) level.**