

The Helsinki Roma Housing Manifesto

A draft concept for

A Trans-Urban Roma Migrant Workers Housing Project

under the patronage of the European Council

General Historical Context

The rights of the Roma people have been trampled on by the nation states where they reside throughout history – from before and after the Holocaust on the Roma in World War II. Today, abuse is again rising to horrific levels.

The situation of the Roma people is by many standards the biggest human rights issue in Europe today. Roma migrant workers (which constitute 10-15% of all European Roma) are in the worst economic position of all precarious migrant groups in Europe today. Despite their rights as European citizens, neither the EU nor individual national states have implemented substantial solutions or taken responsibility for precarious Roma migrant workers. There is an evident lack of political will, both on the side of the nation states and in the implementation of nominally positive policies by the European Commission.

The right to housing is a basic human right. Adequate housing is essential for human survival with dignity. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations in 1948, establishes an internationally recognized set of standards for all persons, without qualification. Article 25 of the Declaration provides that, “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including [...] housing”. Furthermore, the EU Free Movement Directive (European Parliament and Council Directive 2004/38/EC of 29 April 2004) guarantees the right of EU citizens and their family members to move and reside freely within the territory of the EU and EEA member states.

Short-term solutions for displaced Roma, such as setting up industrial-type housing containers at the periphery of cities, satisfy neither conditions of adequate humane treatment nor of sustainability in the long-term. We consider it an EU-level responsibility to provide a housing and social security strategy for precarious Roma migrant workers.

Violent measures against Roma have recently been observed in almost all EU states. These have included mass evictions of long-term Roma settlements and the expulsion of Roma precarious migrant workers. Such horrific, in part illegal violence testifies to the continued presence of the anti-tsiganism which led to the Holocaust, and recalls the persistence of the threat of crimes against humanity on our continent.

A Housing Project for Precarious Migrant Roma workers

Europe has been the home of the Roma people for almost a thousand years. People all over Europe need to work towards a project for Roma living, including housing, which makes it clear that Roma are welcome neighbours in our towns, cities, countries and on our continent. This starting point is our most basic and essential proposal.

In this context, the solution of the housing problems of Roma precarious migrant workers must be seen as a new platform for 'social innovation'. It is a long-term European level project designed for the next decade.

We propose a trans-urban concept that is applied in local contexts in various European countries. The general proposal is to build a network of 'Open Houses' or 'Migrant Hotels' in many European cities.

This will provide different solutions in different localities, based on a set common principles:

- I. Legal frameworks for urban diversity and equality – Common Stake Holders**
- II. Combining institutionalized help and self-help**
- III. Developing new concepts of civil rights: Urban citizenship and European citizenship**
- IV. Developing a framework for precarious workers' rights more generally**
- V. Providing access to social services such as education, work and health care**

I. Legal Frameworks for Urban Diversity and Equality – Common Stake Holders

- i. Urban space has to be seen as space of diversity and not of assimilation.
- ii. Roma migrant workers and other city inhabitants need to develop a shared vision.
 1. All who inhabit a space should have the right to have a stake in it (*spatial justice*).
 2. The approach must be participatory from the first day and build on the needs of the people.
 3. Housing concepts should provide flexibility, so that new inhabitants have the possibility to co-create their living conditions.
- iii. Innovative housing projects must be open for new rules and systems of understanding space and time, enabling new trans-urban legal frameworks.
 1. Such new legal frameworks must be designed to enable trans-urban mobility combined with social services, including above all, housing.
 2. This could include, for example, a system of rights and responsibilities which is transferable between multiple social security systems of cities, municipalities or countries.
 3. Basic principles should furthermore guarantee that all should have equal access to the urban infrastructure, which means there can be no segregation of Roma precarious workers at the periphery.

II. Institutional Social Security and Self-help Combined

- i. Institutionalized help should be combined with self-help.
 - 1. A strong and supportive transnational network of migrant-community, local, municipal, national and EU-level institutions and organisations should be built, that deals with the issue of housing of the Roma precarious migrant workers.
- ii. Self-help must be enabled and facilitated by providing spaces and opportunities for participation at all levels of the migrant communities.
 - 1. Forms of habitation and systems of rights and organisation created from below should be encouraged
 - 2. Temporary spaces of residence should be seen in a longer perspective, which allows for developing small steps and self-organisation towards longer-term solutions.
- iii. An institutional framework must be established.
 - 1. The provision of shelter and minimum social services must be guaranteed, even before more sustainable solutions have been found.
 - 2. In dialogue with the communities, long-term frameworks can be agreed upon, based on the principles expressed in this document.

III. New concepts of civil rights: Urban citizenship and European citizenship

- i. The rights of Roma migrant workers cannot be in practice granted through their national citizenship. New forms of urban, trans-urban or European citizenship can provide solutions, guaranteeing their basic rights.
- ii. Urban citizenship could open institutional space for experimental housing solutions.
- iii. The further development European citizenship for migrant workers should be developed based on the above principles and needs:
 - 1. The right to housing, work permissions and other civic rights and responsibilities have to be separated from national citizenship.
 - 2. Many forms of work have become flexibilized and precaritized, involving mobility, change and migration. For this basic reason, diverse social rights, including housing rights, need to become equally transferable within the European Union.

III. The rights of precarious workers

- i. The work of Roma migrant workers has to be acknowledged as a relevant and growing part of the European economy.
 - 1. The labour market contains a significant portion of Roma workers, including migrant workers.
 - 2. In many countries of the EU, this reliance on Roma labour will inevitably grow. An impoverished, illiterate, decimated population is not only a threat to social cohesion, but a threat to economic sustainability.

- ii. The labour rights of migrant Roma workers must be acknowledged and supported.
 1. The organisation of Roma migrant workers and networking with other trade unions of precarious workers in Europe must be supported.
 2. Unions have played an important and stabilizing factor in European societies and economies.

IV. Access to social services such as education, employment and health care

- i. Access to the basic right of education must be developed in a joint strategy with the system of housing.
- ii. Access to health services must be included in this joint strategy.
- iii. Access to employment services must be included in this joint strategy.

THE HELSINKI HOUSING MANIFESTO is a result of “The Housing Agenda / Under the Bridge – Helsinki”, a public discussion at Ateneum Museum, 27-28 September 2011, in Helsinki, Finland.

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