

# Leveraging the European Green Deal for Roma: Reflections on the Roma Environmental Justice Conference Organised by the European Environmental Bureau in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, 2023

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## Recognition and Summary Statement

With an ambitious title, “First Roma Environmental Justice Conference – Leveraging the EU Roma Strategic Framework”, the European Environmental Bureau (EEB) invited academia, civil society organisations, policymakers, and public authorities to discuss environmental racism as a policy concern under the national Roma strategic frameworks, as well as other national policies regarding education, employment, environment, housing, and social protection policies in Cluj-Napoca in October 2023 (EEB 2023).

Together with the publication of its flagship report, *Pushed to the Wastelands: Environmental Racism against Roma Communities in Central and Eastern Europe* (Heidegger and Wiese 2020), and a more recent follow-up, *Bearing the Brunt: Roma and Traveller Experiences of Environmental Racism in Western Europe* (Marin 2024), the conference was an attempt to engage Europe’s largest network of environmental citizen organisations with the inequalities that Roma in Europe face regarding their exposure to environmental pollution and harm.

However, if the topic is to gain a foothold in current environmental policymaking at the EU level, sustained efforts and active linkages are required between environmental injustices faced by racialised communities in Europe and today’s most dynamic environmental policy field in the EU – that is, climate change adaptation and mitigation under the European Green Deal.

Both academics and policymakers attended this three-day event in Cluj. The first day, dedicated to a closed workshop for civil society organisations, aimed to work on a Cluj Manifesto for environmental justice. On the second and third days a public conference, with experts and academics devoted to the topic, took place. Its location allowed for a field visit to one site that has become infamous for environmental injustices faced by Roma – the landfill Pata Rât, which participants toured on the last day.

Contributions included concrete case studies on environmental injustices, analysis of the limitations of currently available qualitative and survey data, as well as reflections on the way these injustices are addressed in current policy frameworks. During the opening panel, Thomas de Jong from the European Public Health Alliance pointed out the effect of climate change on increasing extant health inequalities. Gabriela Hrabánová, Director of the ERGO Network, pointed out how NRSFs (National Strategic Reference Frameworks) currently omit most environmental aspects. Diego Marin (European Environmental Bureau – EEB) presented an overview of the case studies of the new EEB report *Bearing the Brunt* that show existing and historically entrenched forms of environmental injustices against Roma in cities in Western Europe. Isabela Mihalache (ERGO Network) analysed the EU Roma Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion and Participation for 2020–2030 (ERSF) and found a comprehensive consideration of Environmental Justice (EJ) in only four schemes (Croatia, France, Hungary, and Spain). The most advanced was Spain, where the NRSF aims for horizontal integration with the National Energy Poverty Strategy. The ERSF includes one section on environmental injustice that tackles unequal exposure to harm through desegregation.

The afternoon section of the conference dealt with Roma inclusion and the European Green Deal. Andrey Ivanov, from the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, presented data sources that speak to environmental

injustices faced by Roma. Enikő Vincze (Desire Foundation) presented existing injustices related to the placement of landfills where the Aarhus Convention is *de facto* not followed by many countries that have ratified it. Vincze concluded that the environmental aspects of social inclusion are not part of the European Pillar of Social Rights. Finally, Jekatyerina Dunajeva (Pázmány Péter Catholic University and HUN-REN Centre for Social Sciences) looked at the component of the European Green Deal concerned with upskilling for the green transition. Collectively, these presentations revealed the pervasive nature of environmental justice that needs be addressed by policy measures.

## Critique and Contextualisation

While these contributions to the unjust distribution of environmental harm are important, what is missing is more systematic engagement with how, after we established the fact of unequal exposure, this problem should be dealt with. Specifically, it remains unclear which policy area the problem of environmental justice should inhabit. My personal view is to locate environmental injustice in Europe's current green transition, and firmly anchor it into policies addressing the climate crisis.

The climate crisis is one of the concerns which has triggered an expansion in EU social policymaking capacity (Miró et al. 2024). With the European Green Deal, the European Commission adopted an ambitious set of initiatives to make the continent carbon-neutral by 2050 with the declared goal of “leaving no one behind”. This momentum could be used for Roma inclusion by contextualizing the environmental injustice these communities face within the current discussion on climate and energy justice.

## Relevance of Environmental Justice for Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation

Environmental injustice is exacerbated by climate change. Overheating and floods tend to be worse in areas with high pollution and little green infrastructure and access to basic services. The idea that inequalities shape (access to) climate change adaptation and exposure to extreme weather events was spelled out in the 2022 briefing “Towards ‘Just Resilience’: Leaving No One Behind When Adapting to Climate Change” by the European Environment Agency (2022) and in the background report to this briefing by the European Topic Centre Climate Change Adaptation (ETC/CCA) entitled “Social Vulnerability to Climate Change in European Cities – State of Play in Policy and Practice” (ETC/CCA 2018). The concept of “just resilience” has very recently been added to Commission Guidelines on Member States’ adaptation strategies and plans (European Commission 2023).

The question of how “just resilience” could be measured and monitored, what the indicators could be, is currently being developed (European Topic Centre Climate Change 2023). Currently, the concepts used to define and methods used to measure “social vulnerability” suffer from significant weaknesses. First, it categorises “Sinti and Roma” as homeless and “difficult to map” populations. Second, the report “unequal exposure” proposes including “vulnerable groups” in climate change adaptation via emergency measures

(instead of systemic solutions) (ETC/CCA 2018). Environmental justice has important insights to offer here. From environmental justice studies we see the workings of environmental racism against Roma as it is entrenched in institutions, which throws the question of “difficult to map” back at the institutional practice of mapping, and the racist, and other, exclusions caused by this practice (epistemological injustice). Second, the plethora of case studies of decades-long environmental injustices bear witness to the need for systemic solutions, such as providing adequate housing instead of “heat shelters” for those currently most exposed to extreme weather events.

Second, environmental justice and environmental racism affect the integration of vulnerable populations into climate change mitigation policies. One of the most important among them is the upcoming decarbonisation of the housing stock which will impact energy costs – especially for those households that cannot afford to switch to renewables and that cannot adequately insulate their houses. With the most recent adoption of the Energy Efficiency Directive recast (European Union 2023), more and more emphasis is put on making such renovations accessible to low-income households. However, just transition policies still pay little to no attention to the way in which the unequal access to basic goods and services is shaped not only by low-income but compounded by other inequality dimensions, such as gender and, importantly in this context, belonging to a group that faces racist discrimination.

## Conclusion

The EU Anti-racism Action Plan 2020–2025 (European Commission 2020) acknowledges that “high levels of inequality among people with a minority racial or ethnic background represent an obstacle to sustainable development”. However, just transition policies so far fail to address the risks that racist discrimination poses to sustainable development, or how to ensure the inclusion of racialised groups in the green transition (Civil Rights Defenders 2023). This significant blind spot can be highlighted via the diverse perspectives and insights shared at this conference.

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