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Roma UN Community Volunteers Milena Reljic and David Georgiev at an event of the Local Initiative for Improved Social Inclusion of Young Roma events in Serbia.

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Award-winning Roma UN Community Volunteer initiative tackles COVID-19

In April 2020, a UN Community Volunteers initiative in Serbia won the prestigious European Roma Youth Project Award 2020. The initiative is part of a joint project of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) called Local Initiatives for Improved Social Inclusion of Young Roma. Empowered and inspired by the award, the leaders of the project and Roma UN Community Volunteers share their most recent achievements in the COVID-19 response within their communities.

UN Community Volunteers Milena Reljic, David Georgiev and Nikola Josipovic are busy with initiatives related to the COVID-19 outbreak, as many other development workers are. They help Roma communities, to which they also belong, to tackle COVID-19 global challenges, and ensure that the interests of the Roma are given due attention and delivered

upon.

The three UN Community Volunteers from within the Roma community were thrilled when their initiative within the joint UNDP-UNHCR project, *Local Initiatives for Improved Social Inclusion of Young Roma*, was selected among four winners of the European *Roma Youth Project Award 2020*.

The project works to combat discrimination and support the most vulnerable members of the Roma community to influence social processes related to inclusion, especially of Roma youth, in community life. Furthermore, the project supports local authorities in increasing their commitment towards inclusion of the Roma by facilitating their employment within local institutions.

Milena is part of the Opre Roma civic movement, which focuses on gathering, analyzing and managing relevant information to deliver the fastest possible response to emergency needs in the Roma communities most at risk.

“ It was important to apply and to be recognized, as we put much effort into our work to empower Roma youth. --Milena Reljic, Roma UN Community Volunteer

Thanks to this project, 65 young Roma were supported in the development of their skills development and employment within local-level institutions to develop, implement and monitor Roma inclusion policies at the local level. The selected candidates increased their knowledge of human rights, discrimination, legally-invisible people, stateless and internally-displaced persons and returnees, and local mechanisms for social inclusion.

“ I work with beneficiaries and organizations to promote Roma culture and traditions. Together with other UN Volunteers, we are now a network of more than 65 young Roma activists who provide support to our local Roma communities. --David Georgiev, Roma UN Community Volunteer

This network is essential in bolstering efforts to counter the COVID-19 pandemic. David, for example, is involved in the response with the Zajecar Red Cross and helps to distribute packages to socially-disadvantaged families.

In Zajecar, much progress was achieved in health support and in reducing inequalities,

thanks to community volunteer engagement. Additionally, serious housing issues decreased, more children were enrolled in kindergartens and primary schools, and, importantly, more young people enrolled in high schools and colleges. Notwithstanding, there are still socially disadvantaged families who need help with food, hygiene and disinfection.

Nikola serves as a UN Volunteer and also coordinates the Mobile Roma Inclusion Team that provides parts of the municipality with drinking water tanks. In the time when sanitation is critically important, these efforts are priceless. "The situation is more difficult nowadays, especially in Roma settlements, where there is a shortage of water and electricity," Nikola says. "If we cannot address problems during such a period, I do not know when they will be solved."

“ The positive thing is that we have unity and solidarity among ourselves and many educated Roma nowadays. The main challenge now is to get through this crisis without any consequences and pursue social inclusion for all. --Nikola Josipovic

Nikola reached out to Representatives of Lajkovac Municipality; with the support of the Association of Roma Coordinators, they visited the Dubrava settlement and provided water reserves for 50 households with no access to drinking water "This settlement was being supplied with drinking water from a neighboring village," Nikola shares. "We brought cisterns, so now people have access to drinking water."

The award inspired the volunteers to enhance their efforts, both in their personal and professional lives.

“ I see myself as a successful neuropsychological scientist who is always there for the local community, empowering Roma youth to engage in the decision-making process for the better Roma community inclusion. --Milena Reljic

Roma UN Community Volunteers and activists Milena Reljic, Nikola Josipovic and David Georgiev. Photocredit: UNV 2020

Roma UN Community Volunteers and activists Milena Reljic, Nikola Josipovic and David

Georgiev. ©UNV, 2020

“ As a young Roma activist, I see myself as a successful person who fights for his people and Roma community locally. We must all together work, for a better tomorrow. --David Georgiev

[Read more](#) about the joint project between UNDP and UNHCR “Local Initiatives for Improved Social Inclusion of Young Roma” in Serbia.

*Opre Roma civic movement in Serbia was formed in 2019 and consists of young Roma from all over Serbia. It fights for the development of democracy and represents the voice of the Roma community.

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