Although minority rights are not central to internal European Union (EU) political debates, 2012 marked significant progress both with regard to the internal and the external dimensions of majority–minority relations within the Union and beyond. A sign that the EU is shifting towards a more coherent and coordinated Roma policy was the call to Member States to develop and submit their National Strategies for Roma Integration (NRIS). At the level of external EU policy making, positive developments can be identified not only in the field of the political rhetoric and programming but also in the launching of action-oriented instruments. The introduction of the EU human rights ‘package’, as a key element of EU external action, and direct references to minority rights in the respective policy and program documents, are changes with the potential to make a wider positive impact on minority rights protection. Although the establishment of the position of EU Special Representative for Human Rights (EUSR), assigned to contribute to the achievement of better cohesion between the internal and the external EU policies, is surely the key element of positive developments during the reported period, continuous institutional cooperation between EU and major international players should also be taken into account.

By examining the progress signposts of 2012, this article will not only report on the major EU institutional developments in minority rights implementation and protection, but will also outline positive changes and raise awareness of persistent challenges that require ongoing monitoring, as well as emerging or shifting trends in EU policies and programmes. For that purpose, it focuses mainly on markers of progress and not necessarily on every event or initiative addressing
minority issues. It addresses both the internal and the external dimensions of EU involvement with minorities, paying particular attention to programs implemented by the EU in cooperation with other key international players such as the Council of Europe (CoE) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

Protection of minority rights has not been an area of particular commitment for the EU during its history of institutional development. Nevertheless, over the years, the topic has gradually become embedded in EU policies, programs and instruments aimed at fostering democratization, enhancing respect for human rights, and promoting values of tolerance and diversity. As early as 1992, pluralism, anti-discrimination and tolerance were highlighted as key horizontal obligations for member states in the Treaty of the European Union (‘Maastricht treaty’; ‘TEU’). In 1993, “respect and protection of minorities” was established as one of the prominent Copenhagen criteria for accession to the EU; while in 2000, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union introduced the term ‘national minorities’ into EU law. Nevertheless, over the first decade of the twenty-first century, the specific legislative competences for protection of minorities remained largely the preserve of Member States.

By contrast, the second decade of the century is already witnessing an intensification of EU commitment to minority issues. The introduction of the word ‘minorities’ into EU primary law and the emphasis on diversity, both as a founding value and an objective of the Treaty of Lisbon (2009), are viewed by researchers as milestones in the ongoing process of increased engagement by the EU with the issue of protection and implementation of minority rights. In 2010, the Strategy Europe 2020—which outlined the Union’s development priorities—created a new obligation for Member States with regard to minorities. Directly referring to minorities as ‘groups at risk’, the Strategy stipulated that Member States must focus their national policies on inclusive growth. Social inclusion and reconciliation of minorities in the Western Balkans were identified as an area of a particular importance in the EU Enlargement strategy for 2010–2011 and as a key challenge

5 Toggenburg and McLaughlin, op.cit. note 3.