

Are Roma Digital Citizens?

By Mustafa Jakupov

In today's hyperconnected world, digital citizenship is no longer optional – it is fundamental. From education and employment to civic participation and access to services, the ability to navigate digital spaces is a requirement of everyday life. But are we as Roma – some of Europe's most structurally marginalised populations – truly included in this digital society? Are we acknowledged, protected, and empowered as digital citizens?

During my research for the Roma Civil Monitor (RCM) initiative, I explored this question in depth. The findings were concerning. Across Europe, Roma are systematically excluded from digital participation – not only through lack of infrastructure, but also through a profound absence in digital education strategies, digital policy frameworks, and mainstream narratives of technological advancement. This exclusion reflects not just a digital divide, but a broader, structural failure to recognise Roma as full citizens in both the physical and digital worlds.

Beyond Access: The Digital Divide Reinforced by Antigypsyism

The digital divide for Roma communities predates the COVID-19 pandemic but was significantly amplified during it. My findings through the RCM showed that Roma students across countries like Bulgaria, Slovakia, Romania, Macedonia, and Hungary lacked basic tools for digital learning: stable internet connections, functional devices, and even access to electricity in some cases. These material inequalities were compounded by a lack of digital literacy support and a profound disconnect between mainstream education systems and the needs of Roma learners[1].

As I wrote in my 2021 article, Existing obstacles for Roma students, "Roma children and students are not provided, from a very early age, with the same learning opportunities as their majority peers, as the vicious circles of poverty and antigypsyism act as powerful barriers." This exclusion often led to students being placed in schools for children with learning disabilities or pushed into segregated or under-resourced institutions. The pandemic turned this digital marginalisation into a full-blown educational emergency[2].

Moreover, while schools rapidly transitioned to online learning, Roma students were often entirely left out. Parents who lacked the education or digital familiarity to assist with online platforms found themselves unable to support their children. The European Commission's Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2027) acknowledges the need to reduce disparities in digital education, but does not sufficiently highlight the needs of ethnically marginalised communities like the Roma[3].

Roma and the Illusion of Inclusion: Curricula, Teachers, and Recognition

Inclusion in the digital age is not just about physical access to devices. As I emphasised in the pursuit of inclusive education for Roma students: ideals vs reality (2022), digital citizenship also requires recognition of cultural identity, representation in the curriculum, and an environment that reflects the learner's dignity and worth[4].

Roma students continue to face exclusion in content and practice. Educational curricula across Europe rarely include Roma history, language, or culture. Teachers are often untrained in working with diverse classrooms. Very few Roma are employed as educators, let alone in digital content development or e-learning design. Where Roma are present in educational institutions, it is often in non-teaching roles – as I noted in my previous article, “Hiring them as cleaners doesn’t count.”

The lack of Roma voices in shaping digital education is particularly alarming. In the digital age, absence from the curriculum means absence from public consciousness. Without strategic investment in inclusive curricula and Roma teacher recruitment, Roma students remain “users” of systems that were never designed with them in mind.

Are Roma Digital Citizens?

To be a digital citizen means more than having a device or internet connection. It means participating in digital society as a full and equal member: contributing, expressing oneself, learning, accessing services, being protected, and being seen.

Yet, Roma communities remain largely invisible in digital citizenship frameworks. Online hate speech against Roma is rampant, as documented by civil society and institutions like the FRA. Meanwhile, Roma youth rarely see themselves reflected in digital civic campaigns, e-learning platforms, or national ICT strategies. Roma civil society is frequently excluded from consultations on digital transformation policies.

The digital divide is not simply a gap in technology. It is a mirror of deeper social inequities, and antigypsyism plays a central role. Exclusion from digital tools is just one layer; exclusion from decision-making processes, from online representation, and from protections against cyber-discrimination forms the deeper, more insidious layer.

Roma Youth: From Digital Consumers to Digital Creators

Despite these barriers, Roma youth have found ways to resist invisibility. On platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, young Roma are sharing their stories, celebrating their culture, and challenging stereotypes. Grassroots initiatives, such as those led by ERGO Network and ternYpe, have promoted Roma digital storytelling and online activism.

But this emerging digital creativity remains unsupported by institutional structures. There is a lack of funding for Roma-led digital initiatives, absence of mentorship or training for Roma digital creators, and limited visibility in mainstream digital literacy campaigns. As I argued in my 2018 article, around the 8th of April, Roma youth represent an opportunity not just for their communities, but for Europe itself[5].

Supporting Roma digital citizenship is not charity. It is an investment in pluralism, innovation, and democratic participation.

What Needs to Change: From Access to Digital Belonging

To ensure Roma are recognised and empowered as digital citizens, we must go beyond access. We must:

- Invest in infrastructure: Ensure Roma settlements have internet, electricity, and access to affordable devices.
- Support digital literacy: Offer training in Romani and national languages, starting with basic skills and progressing to content creation and critical engagement.
- Promote representation: Recruit Roma educators, developers, and content creators. Include Roma stories, language, and perspectives in national digital education strategies.
- Combat online antigypsyism: Monitor hate speech, strengthen protections, and amplify Roma-led narratives online.
- Involve Roma in policymaking: At every level – from national recovery plans to EU digital strategies – Roma civil society must be at the table.

These measures align with the European Pillar of Social Rights, the EU Roma Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion and Participation 2020–2030, and the objectives of the Digital Decade 2030. But unless they are implemented with Roma in mind – and with Roma in the lead – digital transformation will only widen the gap.

Conclusion: Roma belongs to the Digital Future

To be a digital citizen means to belong. Roma communities must not be relegated to the margins of Europe's digital transition. Their exclusion is not inevitable – it is the result of policy choices that can and must be changed.

As we build Europe's digital future, we must ask not only who has access, but who has agency. Roma communities are ready. What they need is recognition, investment, and inclusion. Only then will Europe truly be a digital union for all.

[1] Roma Civil Monitor (2024) Digital Inclusion of Roma: Current Patterns, Trends, and Barriers. Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg. By Mustafa Jakupov: https://romacivilmonitoring.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/RCM_2025_Thematic-report-DIGITAL-final-ISBN.pdf

[2] Jakupov, Mustafa (2021), Existing obstacles for Roma students, ERGO Network: <https://digigen.eu/digigenblog/digital-deprivation-should-not-become-a-new-obstacle-for-roma-students/>

[3] European Commission, Digital Education Action Plan 2021–2027, COM(2020) 624 final: <https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/digital-education/action-plan>

[4] Jakupov, Mustafa (2022), The pursuit of inclusive education for Roma students: ideals vs reality, Council of Europe/ERGO Network: <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/inclusive-education-for-roma-children/-/the-pursuit-of-inclusive-education-for-roma-students-ideals-vs-reality>

[5] Jakupov, Mustafa (2018), 8th of April – We can do it! Better, faster, harder...!!!, No Hate Speech Movement: <https://rromassn.org/8th-of-april-we-can-do-it-better-faster-harder/>