

## **“Roma access to quality and inclusive education, training, and lifelong learning in Bulgaria”**

### ***Case Study 2025***

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Integro Association is a civil organization led by representatives of the Roma community in Bulgaria. It is composed of 12 local Roma civil society organizations from different parts of the country, united by their common cause to achieve an equal and respected position of the Roma community among the other members of Bulgarian society. Integro strives to make visible the problems and needs of the Roma from the remote settlements of Bulgaria. The organization's activities are aimed at community mobilization, creating an active Roma leadership capable of challenging the passivity of both Roma and public authorities, so that they can share the responsibility for overcoming inequality, social exclusion and poverty among Roma, and for achieving cohesion and prosperity at the local level and in society as a whole. The Association's guiding principles are the enforcement of human rights, democratic procedures, transparency, partnership and trust in the community and society.

The present case study is based on qualitative research, which included a review of various documents — statistical data, reports and analyses by national and international institutions, as well as reports and analyses by civil society organizations, including information collected under the Roma Civil Monitor initiative. Additional data were drawn from a survey conducted by Integro as part of the European Commission's ROMACT programme in over 30 municipalities across the country. Alongside the survey, information was also gathered through community focus groups, individual interviews with community leaders, community mediators, and representatives of local authorities and institutions.

A substantial part of the research focused on the reasons for the limited access of Roma children to quality education, the challenges of inclusive education, and the dropout of Roma children from school — particularly at higher levels of education.

The Roma community in Bulgaria is one of the most socio-economically vulnerable groups. A large share of Roma face a very high risk of falling into poverty. According to the Survey on Income and Living Conditions (NSI, BG-SILC), in 2022 the relative share of Roma at risk of poverty was 63.2%, while the share of Roma at risk of poverty and social exclusion was 81.6%, compared to 25% among people from the Bulgarian ethnic group.

Data from a large-scale survey conducted in 2020 under the project *“Novel Approaches to Generating Data on Hard-to-Reach Populations at Risk of Violation of their Rights”* show that 43.5% of Roma live in poor housing conditions, 76.9% live in overcrowded housing, and 34.7% live in homes without an indoor toilet and bathroom. The proportion of Roma children living in poor housing conditions (over 70%) is much higher than that of Bulgarian children in the same situation (less than 10%).

Unemployment among Roma is significantly higher than the national average. Housing conditions in many Roma neighbourhoods are deteriorated, with a lack of basic infrastructure and services such as water supply, sewerage, and access to transport. Roma communities experience spatial segregation and institutional discrimination, which hinder their access to public services.

Many Roma children do not have access to quality education and healthcare, which greatly limits their opportunities for professional development and personal growth. The 2022 Roma Civil Monitor (RCM) report identified persistent challenges in the field of Roma education, including educational segregation, high dropout rates, and insufficient representation of Roma culture and language in school curricula.

Access to quality inclusive education is key to overcoming poverty and marginalization among Roma and serves as a main instrument for social mobility and for addressing structural inequalities. For Roma, who have traditionally been excluded from public life, quality and inclusive education provides not only a foundation for personal development but also an opportunity to become active citizens.

Good education increases the chances of employment, reduces the risk of social isolation, and improves access to healthcare and other services. Inclusive education — one that takes into account cultural and linguistic differences and combats discrimination — creates conditions for Roma children to develop on an equal footing with their peers. It also contributes to building a socially cohesive society, where differences are valued as an asset rather than seen as an obstacle.

Conversely, the lack of inclusion in education leads to lower qualifications among Roma youth, condemning them to low-paid and low-prestige jobs or unemployment, and perpetuating anti-Roma stereotypes.

This is why ensuring equal access to quality education — from early childhood education through to university — is one of the most important preconditions for the inclusion and social integration of the Roma community into Bulgarian society.

## Roma access to quality and inclusive education in *Bulgaria*

### *Early childhood education and care*

In Bulgaria, early childhood education and care (ECEC) typically begins after the child turns 3 years old. This is because mothers in Bulgaria are entitled to childcare leave until the child's second birthday. Most statistics and studies on ECEC refer to children aged 4 to 6. The most reliable data on Roma children's access to early education and care can be found in the joint report "Early Childhood Development in Roma Communities in Bulgaria", published under the Early Childhood Development Program of the Open Society Foundations, the Roma Education Fund, World Bank, [worldbank.org+2osis.bg+2socialachievement.org+2unicef.org](http://worldbank.org+2osis.bg+2socialachievement.org+2unicef.org).

This report notes that overall, the share of children aged 4–6 in Bulgaria enrolled in early education and care is just over 80%, which is significantly below the EU average of over 95%. For Roma children, this access is even more limited — only about two-thirds of Roma children aged 4–6 are enrolled in education and care. According to unofficial data from NGOs, slightly more than half of Roma children aged 0–6 in Bulgaria do not attend kindergarten or preschool at all. Again according to unofficial data, the share of Roma children under age 3 in kindergarten is under 20%.

The main barriers to Roma children's access to early education and care can be grouped into the following general categories:

- **Lack of adequate infrastructure.** In many Roma neighbourhoods — especially in small or remote settlements — there are no nurseries, kindergartens, or early development centres. To attend kindergarten, children from these areas often have to travel to the nearest town. A similar problem arises when there is only one kindergarten in the settlement. In most cases, the kindergarten is located far from the Roma neighbourhood, and the lack of transport combined with unfavourable weather conditions makes access nearly impossible. In addition, many kindergartens with higher proportions of Roma children lack adequate equipment, educational materials, and safe, well-maintained spaces.
- **Financial and material difficulties.** In recent years, kindergartens in Bulgaria have become free of charge for all children. However, this covers only the main fee; parents often face additional costs — for food, educational and hygiene materials, transportation, required documents, etc. Many Roma parents are unable to cover these expenses.
- **Communication challenges between teachers, parents, and children.** Teachers working in kindergartens are qualified according to state requirements. Unfortunately, teacher training programs still have gaps when it comes to working in a multicultural environment. As a result, many teachers lack the skills to implement interactive and inclusive education. Very few teachers speak the Romani language, while many Roma children entering kindergarten speak only their mother tongue.

There are very few bilingual specialists or culturally sensitive staff. This language mismatch makes it difficult for young children to adapt. The language barrier also affects parents, many of whom do not speak Bulgarian well either. This creates communication problems between teachers and parents, which in turn fosters mutual mistrust. Teachers feel they are not understood by the parents, while parents often feel unwelcome in the kindergarten, fearing they will not be treated well.

In Bulgaria, early childhood care is divided into two stages: for children up to the age of three – called “nursery care” (*detska yasla*) – and preschool education for children aged four to six. Care for children under the age of three is provided by medical staff, mainly paediatric nurses, and is focused primarily on proper nutrition and healthy child-rearing. In principle, children can be enrolled in kindergarten as early as one year old, but very few families make use of this option, perhaps due to the relatively long maternity leave in Bulgaria.

For Roma families in particular, many Roma mothers cannot benefit from maternity leave because they lack formal employment history, and therefore they usually prefer to raise their children at home until the age of three or four. Temporary childcare services in kindergartens—intended for situations when the mother is busy or needs a break—are also not very popular. Instead, families tend to rely more on grandparents or relatives.

In all cases, for Roma children, not attending kindergarten before the age of three has a strongly negative impact on their later socialization.

### ***Financial barriers to education***

Although education in Bulgaria is formally free and state and municipal schools do not charge tuition fees up to the completion of secondary education, the reality for many Roma families is different. Poverty among many Roma families remains a key factor limiting the educational opportunities of Roma children. Many Roma parents struggle to provide their children with appropriate clothing and shoes for school, as well as notebooks and other school supplies.

In remote rural areas, the distance to school entails transportation costs that families cannot always afford. In addition, families need to cover the cost of food for children who study in another settlement. Roma parents are often forced to choose which child can continue studying when resources are insufficient to support all of them — and girls are usually the first to drop out.

Higher education poses additional financial barriers. Beyond the daily cost of living, families also face application fees, travel expenses to universities, as well as costs for textbooks and rent — all of which are unaffordable for most Roma youth. Not only private but also state universities charge semester fees, which are significant for a socially disadvantaged student and difficult for their families to pay. The state does have a policy of supporting students through scholarships, but many Roma youth cannot access them due to academic performance requirements or other restrictions.

### ***Non-financial barriers to education***

There are also numerous non-financial barriers that impede equal access of Roma to quality education. Territorial isolation and the lack of educational infrastructure in Roma neighbourhoods are among the most significant obstacles to the education of Roma children. In many Roma settlements, especially in small towns and villages, there is no school within walking distance. Beyond the distance itself, additional problems arise from the lack of safe pedestrian infrastructure (such as sidewalks, lighting, bridges, etc.) on the roads leading to school. In many areas, there are no schools offering the upper secondary stage. To continue their education at the secondary level, students have to travel to larger towns, which not only involves costs but also requires more travel time, exposes them to risks in bad weather, and depends on irregular public transport.

In recent years, the state and municipalities have introduced school buses, but these do not cover all settlements — and Roma children are often the most affected.

The quality of education in schools with a high proportion of Roma students also remains problematic. Many of these schools suffer from a lack of resources and qualified teaching staff — including a shortage of specialists, speech therapists, and resource teachers — as well as limited extracurricular activities, libraries, sports facilities, and more. A significant share of teachers lack the necessary pedagogical and methodological preparation to work effectively with Roma children.

The language barrier is another non-financial factor that strongly affects the educational success of Roma children. For many of them, Bulgarian is not their mother tongue, and when they start kindergarten or first grade, their vocabulary is limited, which affects their learning at all stages of education.

The insufficient engagement of parents is also among the challenges to educational integration. This is less a matter of “fault” on the parents’ part, and more a consequence of the social exclusion experienced by Roma families. It is true that some parents do not attend parent-teacher meetings or seek contact with teachers, but at the same time schools often fail to make the necessary efforts to understand families’ needs and to involve them in school life.

### ***School segregation and schools for special needs***

Since the signing of the Framework Programme for the Integration of Roma and the subsequent Decade of Roma Inclusion and Roma Integration Strategies, school segregation on ethnic grounds has been addressed with significant emphasis. Yet, to this day, no meaningful progress has been achieved in this regard. Segregation of Roma children remains a reality in the Bulgarian education system.

According to the 2022 Roma Civil Monitor report, 930 general education schools and 150 vocational high schools have a high concentration of students from vulnerable groups — representing almost half of the schools in Bulgaria. Segregation manifests in several forms:

- A considerable number of schools where Roma children are the majority or even the sole group of students.
- Segregated Roma-only classes in so-called “mixed” schools, where it is common practice for non-Roma children to be taught in separate classes from Roma children.
- Continued practice of referring Roma children to special schools for children with disabilities.
- Steering Roma children toward vocational high schools with lower social prestige, instead of general education programs — often without clear consent or informed choice by the parents.
- An ongoing process of secondary segregation, whereby non-Roma families withdraw their children from schools attended by Roma children, unwilling to have them educated together.

While primary segregation is a legacy of the past — when there were policies to separate Roma children in neighbourhood schools or boarding schools — secondary segregation has intensified following initial desegregation measures and is deepening further today.

Legislation explicitly prohibits segregation and separation of students on ethnic grounds. Nonetheless, such practices still occur in some places. So far, there are no adequate and effective mechanisms for genuine desegregation — only declarative political commitments.

The placement of healthy Roma children without intellectual or mental disabilities in special schools is a practice inherited from the past which, unfortunately, continues to exist despite the current legal framework and the efforts of NGOs. Bulgarian legislation allows children with various disabilities, including intellectual ones, to attend mainstream schools, and school authorities are not permitted to refuse their enrolment. In recent years, a process of closing down special schools for children with intellectual disabilities has been underway. Nevertheless, some of these schools still exist in one form or another.

In order for a child to be enrolled in such a school, a medical assessment is required as well as the parents’ consent. To obtain this consent, school authorities often offer parents various incentives—such as free meals and full support, “easier curricula,” and other benefits. In practice, it is mostly poor Roma families who are drawn to these incentives and, even though their children are perfectly healthy, agree to their enrolment in such schools. The admission of these children is then “formalized” through routine medical examinations and testing procedures.

Very often, such schools are the only available option in small settlements, leaving poor families with little or no alternative for a better educational choice.

### ***Early school leaving and NEETs***

Early school leaving among Roma children and youth is one of the most serious challenges facing Roma education. Due to the prohibition on collecting data based on ethnicity, the Ministry of Education cannot provide an exact assessment of the problem. However, there are indirect data that shed light on the situation.

According to NSI data from 2020, nearly 17,500 children dropped out of school, with a significant share of them being Roma. Unofficial estimates indicate that the dropout rate among Roma children is nearly six times higher than among non-Roma — around 60% of Roma children leave school before completing secondary education. Earlier data from the Ministry of Education show that, in practice, almost one in four Roma children does not attend school at all. The share of Roma completing secondary education is less than 20%, while over 65% of Roma youth aged 18–24 are NEETs (not in education, employment, or training). Unfortunately, there are no precise data on the share of Roma youth and Roma women who are NEETs, but it is certain that the proportion of Roma women in this category is significantly higher.

The reasons for dropping out are diverse, but generally Roma boys leave school for economic reasons. After reaching 17–18 years of age, they are expected to start working to support the family, often traveling with their fathers for seasonal work or abroad. For girls, early marriages and childbearing are more common factors. In many communities, early marriages are practiced, and girls marry before turning 16, after which they drop out and rarely return to school.

Poverty and the need for work are structural reasons for dropout. Many Roma families simply cannot afford to support their children as students until the age of 18–19. In the absence of scholarships or social benefits, every additional working hand is crucial for the household. It is therefore not surprising that dropout rates are highest among the poorest households.

The educational environment and motivation also play a role. When Roma students attend segregated schools with lower standards, they often lose interest or see no point in continuing. Discrimination and negative experiences at school are additional factors. Some Roma children become targets of insults or bullying by classmates on ethnic grounds, which makes them hate school. If a teacher or principal shows overt or covert prejudice — for example, punishing Roma students more harshly or humiliating them in front of the class — this can also lead to dropping out. Such cases are not rare, especially in mixed schools where Roma children are a minority and an easy target for harassment.

Migration also contributes to dropout.

When a Roma child enrolls in a school where Roma students are a very small minority, they inevitably face poor and unequal treatment from their classmates, and often even from teachers. In such an environment, Roma students must constantly prove themselves and make much greater efforts to succeed. Yet even in these cases, attitudes toward them rarely improve. At best, non-Roma students may “tolerate” them, but do not accept them as equals. Usually, the result is that the Roma child leaves school.

These anti-Roma attitudes extend into other areas as well. For example, in the sphere of employment, many Roma graduates with higher education find it difficult to secure appropriate jobs and rarely have opportunities for career advancement. Most are forced to settle for positions far below their educational level. The inability to achieve proper labor market realization, despite good education, acts as a powerful demotivating factor and often discourages young Roma from pursuing higher education.

Early school leaving among Roma children is the result of complex factors — poverty, cultural practices, systemic deficits, and discrimination. The solution requires an equally complex, cross-sectoral approach. It is crucial that not only the Ministry of Education but also social assistance agencies, local authorities, and Roma communities work together to keep every child in school at least until the completion of secondary education.

### ***Antigypsyism in education, training, and lifelong learning***

Manifestations of discrimination and hostility toward Roma are not uncommon in the field of education and significantly hinder the equal participation of Roma in the educational process. They most often stem from prevailing stereotypes and prejudices against Roma and take diverse forms and expressions.

Anti-Roma attitudes lead some teachers to have low expectations and biased perceptions of Roma children — viewing them a priori as “poor students,” “undisciplined,” or “without prospects.” As a result, Roma children often receive less attention, and lower standards are applied to them. Teachers sometimes ignore Roma students in class or exclude them from initiatives, making them feel unwelcome. This, in turn, negatively affects the children’s self-esteem and motivation.

Antigypsyism creates a hostile environment at school for Roma students. They are often subjected to insults, mockery, or social exclusion from classmates on ethnic grounds. Terms like “gypsy” continue to be used as slurs in schools, and sometimes even escalate into physical bullying. Unfortunately, such incidents often go “unnoticed” by teachers and school management and remain unsanctioned, creating among victims the sense that such abuse goes unpunished.

Because of frequent mockery, isolation, or verbal attacks, many parents choose either not to enroll their children in school at all or to withdraw them prematurely. In the context of digitalized education, Roma students are also often subjected to online abuse, which likewise remains unaddressed due to the lack of adequate policies.

Antigypsyism sometimes manifests in subtle discriminatory practices, such as disproportionate punishments. Roma students with excessive absences are directly expelled from school, rather than being supported by mediators or social workers. Roma children also tend to receive harsher penalties (such as transfer to another school) compared to non-Roma children for similar infractions.

Poverty among Roma families sometimes also leads to discriminatory attitudes and unequal treatment. For example, during COVID-19 many Roma students lacked devices or internet access for online learning. Instead of showing understanding, some schools formally assigned failing grades to children who could not participate, effectively punishing them for being poor. This was not overt ethnic discrimination, but in practice it disproportionately affected poor Roma families, exacerbating their educational disadvantage. This illustrates how unintentional institutional practices can perpetuate antigypsyism if they fail to take into account the specific difficulties of the Roma community.

Bulgarian legislation prohibits discrimination and unequal treatment in education. In practice, however, very few cases of antigypsyism in schools reach the Commission for Protection against Discrimination or the courts. This is partly because Roma parents often do not believe it is worth complaining, are unaware of their rights, or fear possible repercussions. As a result, antigypsyism in education largely remains invisible and unpunished.

Moreover, it is often seen as “normal” — for example, when an entire neighbourhood protests the construction of a school over fears it will “fill up with Roma children,” few publicly condemn it.

To effectively combat antigypsyism in education, it is crucial first and foremost for the Ministry of Education and schools to acknowledge that ethnically motivated bullying and discrimination exist and to address them in their policies. Adequate training should be provided to teaching staff to help them recognize and overcome their own biases and to improve intercultural communication. A particularly important step is the inclusion of Roma culture and history in the curriculum to foster understanding and respect for Roma among all students.

### ***Support for Roma parents***

The main reason many Roma parents struggle to support and guide their children in education is that 64% of Roma families live below the poverty line. In addition, many of them themselves have low levels of education. Meaningful parental involvement in a child’s education is difficult when the family is fighting daily for survival.

Unfortunately, poor families do not receive the full social support they need from the state. Social assistance and child benefits are set at levels that cover only the bare minimum for the family’s physical survival. Moreover, receiving these benefits is tied to the child’s school attendance. If a child, for various reasons, begins to miss school more often, the family can lose a significant portion of the benefits they rely on — further impoverishing them and making it harder to return the child to school. In practice, instead of receiving real support — both material and expert help to overcome the difficult situation — parents are sanctioned through withdrawal of benefits.

One way to support Roma parents is by actively involving them as partners of the school. However, many Roma parents feel uncomfortable visiting the school or talking to teachers, especially if they themselves have negative memories of their own schooling. In many schools, educational mediators already work to motivate and support parents’ participation in school life.

In recent years, the problem of children whose parents work abroad has also deepened. These children are left in the care of relatives in Bulgaria or move abroad with their parents. Unfortunately, there is currently no national program that specifically addresses the needs of children of migrant parents (whether Roma or not). In practice, even the modest child benefits cannot be claimed by the relatives caring for the children due to administrative obstacles and the lack of adequate regulation.

### ***Educational support measures***

In Bulgaria, the idea of educational mediators was initially piloted through NGO projects, and since 2018 the state has systematically funded their employment in schools with a high concentration of vulnerable groups. According to estimates by NGOs and the Ministry of Education (2023–2024), around 800–900 mediators are currently working across the country, but their number does not meet the full needs.

The introduction of educational mediators was a long and obstacle-filled process—lasting more than 15 years. It began with NGO-led projects, followed by advocacy for including such initiatives in the Operational Programme Education under the European Structural Funds. Later, again through advocacy from Roma NGOs, the Ministry of Education established special programs for schools with a significant share of Roma students. These programs provided schools with funding for additional extracurricular activities, equipment, and the hiring of educational mediators.

Despite resistance from teaching staff in many schools, educational mediators proved the value of their work and gradually became more widely accepted. At present, an official job description for the profession of “Educational Mediator” has been developed, and it is included in the national classification of professions. Educational mediation is becoming increasingly established, although the full potential of educational mediators has yet to be fully utilized.

Mediators are usually members of the Roma community who work at a school or kindergarten, supporting communication with parents and assisting students in various ways. In most cases, the mediators speak the language of the community, which enables them to play a bridging role — explaining the school’s requirements to parents in accessible language and, conversely, helping teachers understand the specific circumstances of the family. In practice, since bilingual education is not provided for in Bulgaria, mediators are often the only support helping children whose mother tongue is not Bulgarian better understand the learning material — but they are not always able to provide the necessary assistance. Therefore, it is important to ensure the presence of language specialists (bilingual teachers), especially in the early grades, to help children with a different mother tongue.

At present, mediators still lack a secure status — most are employed on labor contracts with schools, but their funding is often temporary, under various programs, and their positions are not guaranteed once the program ends. The profession of “educational mediator” needs to be institutionalized and sustainably funded through the state education budget, so it does not depend on projects.

There is still a lack of adequate training and clearly defined responsibilities — mediators are often burdened with administrative tasks or assigned roles such as security guards, which are not part of their intended function.

### ***Promotion of Romani culture, history, and language***

In Bulgaria, the Romani language is not included as a subject in the mandatory school curriculum. There is no systematic opportunity to study Romani in primary, lower secondary, or upper secondary schools. Only a few extracurricular activities (within NGO programs) provide short-term language support or cultural activities in Romani. In practice, however, the scope of these opportunities is very limited.

Several barriers contribute to this situation — the lack of qualified Romani language teachers, insufficient interest or awareness among parents, and sometimes even subtle resistance from school administrations (due to the stigma that Romani is not “useful”). According to data from the Amalipe Center, less than 1% of teachers in Bulgaria are of Roma origin, even though in some regions more than 15% of students are Roma. This creates a cultural and linguistic gap between students and teachers.

While school programs include topics on ethnic diversity, they rarely present a deep and authentic representation of Roma culture, contributions, and identity — more often they are reduced to folkloric or stylized depictions. There is an elective subject in lower secondary school called *“Folklore of the Ethnic Groups — Roma Folklore”*, in which students (not only Roma) learn about customs, stories, and songs from the Roma tradition.

Bulgarian curricula hardly cover the genocide of Roma during World War II. Its inclusion in textbooks is limited to mentions in some newer teaching aids, but it is not systematically integrated into lessons. Analyses of educational content show that until recently, Roma were presented mainly through negative stereotypes or as curiosities — stereotypical texts linked Roma only to music and crafts, but not to science or art. In 2020, with the support of Roma organizations, changes were introduced to history curricula to include topics on the Roma Holocaust and the slavery of Roma in the territories of today’s Romania and Bulgaria during the Ottoman period.

In this sense, the inclusion of Roma culture, history, and language in the educational process is important both for Roma students (for their self-esteem and identity) and for non-Roma students (to foster tolerance and break down stereotypes).

### ***Lifelong learning and the education of adults***

One of the main priorities of the *“Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning in Bulgaria 2021–2030”* ([www.navet.government.bg/bg/media/strategicheska-ramka\\_obrobuuchene\\_110321-1.pdf](http://www.navet.government.bg/bg/media/strategicheska-ramka_obrobuuchene_110321-1.pdf)) is *“Lifelong Learning.”* This priority broadly outlines the opportunities for adult education and skills development. It describes measures for the validation of knowledge and skills in the field of vocational education and training acquired through non-formal learning, for including individuals who have not completed secondary education in education and training programs, for promoting formal education, non-formal training, and informal learning, and for motivating individuals to participate. The framework also foresees the creation of a network of “second chance” schools, among other initiatives.

The state has an institutional framework to support adult participation in education, through so-called evening (part-time) schools or independent study programs, literacy courses for adults (primarily for those who have not completed 4th grade), NGO-run training centres, vocational qualification courses, and others. Roma are a target group for many of these measures, and there are no institutional barriers to their participation in any particular program.

However, in general, interest in these forms of education is low — only 21% of people aged 18–24 are willing to enrol in such programs, and among Roma the share is even lower. Adult Roma who wish to study often face ridicule or lack of understanding from those around them, which demotivates them. Additional demotivation comes from the duration of the training and the time commitment required by the programs. Some forms, such as literacy or vocational courses, are not tailored to people’s preferences or the local context. Often the trainings themselves are conducted perfunctorily and do not lead to significant capacity building for the participants.

Many adult Roma are motivated to make up for missed educational opportunities, but the available forms of learning need to be further developed with more flexible approaches, such as distance learning for adults, weekend classes, accelerated courses, and others.

Unfortunately, there are still no developed forms of non-formal education that could meaningfully engage large groups of young people while also providing opportunities for personal development. The system continues to rely on traditional extracurricular activities connected to established school subjects. For those who have dropped out of school, evening classes or individual forms of education are offered within the framework of the school system.

Labor offices provide training programs for basic literacy or for acquiring qualifications in professions that are often low-status and poorly paid. I am not aware of any programs for learning traditional Roma crafts. Our observations show that such crafts are gradually disappearing and are not being passed on to the next generations, even within the communities themselves, since they rarely provide sufficient income to sustain families.

At the national level, no measures are being taken in this direction. A likely reason for this is the lack of recognition of traditional Roma culture, including craft traditions, stemming from the stereotypes and prejudices held by the majority population against Roma.

### ***(Digital) Skills for the labour market and for social mobility***

It can be said that a large proportion of Roma have much more limited access to vocational training and career development opportunities compared to members of other ethnic groups. The main reason for this is that Roma are predominantly employed in sectors that do not require specific skills or knowledge and where no special professional qualifications are necessary. Consequently, employers in these sectors do not offer training or development courses for their Roma employees, since this could enable them to find better jobs and leave these low-paid, unskilled positions.

Vocational courses are also offered by employment offices, but they often do not correspond to labour market needs or have educational attainment requirements that exclude Roma with lower levels of education.

According to data from the European Union website, only 35.5% of Bulgarians (aged 16–74) have basic digital skills, and among Roma this share is even lower — below 20%. Roma face serious difficulties when applying for jobs online, submitting documents electronically, or using digital services. General efforts to improve digitalization are targeted at the population as a whole and do not identify Roma as a priority vulnerable group. At the same time, the education system does not sufficiently integrate digital literacy and digital competence into school curricula, which limits opportunities for socio-economic mobility. Adult education programs do not include large-scale digital training and are often private or company-based, making them inaccessible to Roma.

It is necessary to develop state programs for digital literacy aimed at Roma students and adults, combining digital skills with employment opportunities through partnerships between schools, municipalities, and employers.

### ***Education in the National Roma Strategic Framework***

The National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for Equality, Inclusion and Participation of Roma (2021–2030) identifies education as a leading priority, with planned actions in four key areas: Early Childhood Development; Access to Quality Pre-school and School Education; Overcoming School Segregation; and Improving Educational Outcomes and Access to Higher Education.

For the first time, the Strategy openly acknowledges the need for desegregation and the creation of a multicultural school environment. The commitment to expanding the network of mediators is reaffirmed, with support from the Ministry of Education and EU co-financed programs. Measures are planned for working with parents, increasing enrollment in pre-school education, and reducing dropout rates. Guidelines and measures are also included to support transitions between educational levels, with a special focus on access to higher education for Roma and other vulnerable groups.

Despite positive trends in addressing educational challenges, some gaps and shortcomings should be noted:

- Lack of specificity in formulating goals and indicators. The objectives are often phrased in general terms, without clearly defined quantitative targets, deadlines, and responsible institutions.
- Lack of sustainable funding. Most measures rely on projects funded by European funds, with no allocation of national budgets for long-term policies.
- No clear mechanism for monitoring and accountability. Although the strategy envisages national and regional monitoring mechanisms, the system does not function effectively and does not provide sufficient publicly accessible data on progress.

- Partial involvement of Roma civil society. While Roma organizations were partially involved in the drafting of the strategy, there is no real mechanism for partnership and joint decision-making in implementing the measures.

#### Recommendations:

1. Introduce specific indicators, including sectoral and ethnic breakdowns (e.g., percentage of Roma children completing primary and secondary education).
2. Ensure state budget funding for implementing the measures, not just project-based financing.
3. Strengthen monitoring, accountability, and participation mechanisms — including active involvement of Roma NGOs in tracking and evaluation.
4. Develop local education plans tailored to the needs of specific municipalities with high Roma populations.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

The Roma community in Bulgaria continues to face significant obstacles to accessing quality and inclusive education from early childhood onwards. The barriers are complex — financial, infrastructural, institutional, and discriminatory. School segregation, high rates of early dropout, low participation in higher education, and the lack of systematic support for parents and teachers maintain and deepen educational inequalities. Despite the existence of a National Roma Strategy, its implementation is hindered by the lack of sustainable funding, clear indicators, effective monitoring, and meaningful involvement of the Roma community. As it stands, the education system expects Roma children to adapt to it, rather than reflecting the diversity of society and ensuring equal participation for all learners.

#### Recommendations:

- Expand access to quality kindergartens and nursery services in Roma neighbourhoods, including through mobile teams and Roma staff.
- Eliminate hidden costs in education by providing targeted support for school supplies, transportation, food, and school clothing.
- Promote desegregation and integration into mainstream schools, including by transferring students from segregated schools.
- Create sustainable support mechanisms for Roma parents, encompassing social services, housing stability, healthcare, and employment.
- Expand the role and number of educational mediators; provide professional development for teachers working in multicultural environments.
- Introduce the teaching of Romani language and culture in the school curriculum, and include Roma history (including the Holocaust and slavery) in textbooks.
- Establish second-chance schools and digital programs for adults to overcome illiteracy and lack of basic skills.
- Implement systematic monitoring of the Roma strategy, with the participation of Roma NGOs and local communities.
- Ensure full participation of Roma in decision-making processes, particularly at the local level, in educational policies and school governance.

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