

EUROPEAN ROMA GRASSROOTS ORGANISATIONS (ERGO) NETWORK

“Roma access to quality and inclusive education, training, and lifelong learning in HUNGARY”

Introduction

The case study was written by Tibor Béres (beres.tibor@autonomia.hu) and Miklós Kóródi (korodim@autonomia.hu), with research support from Nóra Gulyás.

The Autonomia Foundation is an independent, private foundation established in 1990 to strengthen civil society, support excluded groups and, above all, promote Roma integration. Its aim is to promote the development of civil society in Hungary, including Roma integration. It does this primarily by supporting civil initiatives in which people mobilize local resources to achieve their goals. Since its establishment, the Foundation has supported and implemented hundreds of Roma inclusion programs, participated in numerous research projects and has an extensive network of contacts. Detailed information on the Foundation's activities is available at www.autonomia.hu.

In writing this case study, we have collected and processed analyses and case studies on the educational situation of Roma from recent years. In some chapters we have also presented the experiences of relevant programmes of the Autonomia Foundation. In our analysis, we have mostly used national data, illustrated in some cases with specific local examples.

Socio-economic situation of the Roma in Hungary

The Roma population, which accounts for around 6-8% of the Hungarian population, is the poorest, most excluded and most vulnerable group in society. The gap between the Roma and the majority of society has been growing since the change of regime, mainly due to residential segregation and segregation in other segments of society, especially in education. Moreover, the educational and labour market position of Roma remains weak, leading to a persistent and deepening poverty. This is often coupled with a negative, often hostile, climate surrounding Roma, which is reflected in prejudice and discrimination from the majority of society (Bernáth, 2014). A significant proportion of the Roma population in Hungary live in segregated settlements, where housing and living conditions are significantly worse than the national average and also than those of non-Roma living in the immediate neighbourhood.

According to the results of the EU-MIDIS II survey ([European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2017](#)), 75% of Roma in Hungary live below the poverty line. At the time of the survey, the share of early school leavers among young people aged 18-24 was 68%, and a quarter of Roma aged 45 and over had not completed any level of formal education. Income poverty rates were closely correlated with the concentration of Roma in settlements: the proportion of Roma living below the poverty line was highest in areas where respondents perceived that Roma residents lived 'exclusively' or 'predominantly' in segregated conditions.

Roma access to quality and inclusive education in Hungary

Early childhood education and care

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for Children Aged 0–3 in Hungary

In Hungary, day nursery services for children aged 0–3 are offered in several forms: centralised nurseries (bölcsőde and mini bölcsőde) and decentralised services (family nurseries, office nurseries). Traditional nurseries provide not only childcare but also support services such as counselling and temporary care. Mini nurseries cater to smaller groups and are easier to establish, especially in municipalities with fewer children.

Family nurseries typically operate from private homes, offering flexible, local care. ‘Sure Start Children Houses’ (SSCHs) primarily serve Roma families, focusing on early development, preventing educational disadvantage, and supporting parents. These service providers are run by local municipalities (70%) and NGO or Church (based organizations): 30%. They have to apply for the operation to the state. It should be noted that organisations that are genuinely independent of the state are unlikely to have access to this facility, even if they are in principle entitled to do so.

Though the number of SSCHs has grown significantly, access remains limited, especially in remote and segregated areas. There is no comprehensive data on Roma children’s access to nurseries, but surveys show that SSCHs reach about half of Roma children and those in multiple-disadvantage situations. Still, many children in poverty or segregation do not access any early care services, despite being those most in need.

Barriers include early-age segregation, limited availability of services in disadvantaged areas, and lack of qualified professionals like psychologists, educators, and social workers. SSCHs often operate as parallel, segregated services rather than integrated ones, undermining their long-term impact.

Services vary widely in quality and availability depending on location. In areas with more segregated populations, professional involvement is often lower, although some SSCHs do involve nurses, social workers, and special educators. Day nurseries are not free but offer means-tested fee reductions or exemptions, which could benefit many Roma families. SSCHs are free, but access may still be hindered by transportation costs and remoteness.

In the Sure Start Houses the maximum number of the children is 17. The average number of Roma children in SSCH is 10-11. An average of 6 of these children live in segregation. A survey among the managers of ‘Sure Start Children Houses’ showed that they estimate reaching 53% of Roma children, 56% of children whose family receives child protection benefit, 54% of children holding multiple disadvantage decisions and 44% of children living in segregated area.

While SSCHs show positive local outcomes, their long-term effect is limited. The lack of systemic integration into the broader educational framework weakens their ability to counteract inequality beyond early childhood.

Case study

Between 2019 and 2023, the Autonomia Foundation participated in the monitoring and evaluation of the so-called Endless Possibilities ('Végtelen lehetőség') EU-funded programme. According to the original plans, this three-year programme was to become a pilot for the Catching Up Settlements (FETE), also partly EU-funded programme, which would later be extended to 300 settlements. Nevertheless, FETE was launched a year after the start of the three-year pilot, without waiting for its results.

In any case, the Endless Possibilities programme provided many lessons. A good example of the aforementioned regional imbalance was the case of a municipality in northern Hungary with a population of about 1,800, almost entirely Roma.

The settlement has five segregated areas (three larger and two smaller), or more precisely, Roma settlements. Around 2015, a 'Biztos kezdet Gyerekház' (Sure Start Children's House) was launched on the outskirts of the first settlement. Women began to bring their children there. Over the next four years, two more buildings with similar functions were built in the same area, about 100 metres apart. This is due to the fact that the Fidesz party member of parliament, who has virtually absolute power in the district, decides on the use of various development funds. Those who are loyal to him and the ruling party receive funding. The interest of the mayors is absorbing as much funding as they can, regardless of its use.

The fact that similar institutions are needed in other settlements in this district, and that their operation would be even more justified in other poor condition areas in the same municipality, i.e. professional considerations do not play a role in the allocation of development funds.

It was surprising when we met the women and their children in the morning at one of the children's homes with the same function. At nine o'clock, however, they all left for another building maintained by another organisation. The professionals told us that this was the schedule: they collect donations and have breakfast at the first location, sign the attendance sheets, and then move on to the other location, where they do the same thing. Unfortunately, this means that they cannot stay for the development session...

Financial barriers to education

Public education in Hungary (nursery, kindergarten, primary and secondary school) is free. However, in recent decades, private schools and mainly church-run institutions have gained a significant role. While the former are subject to substantial, but very different, tuition fees, the latter are virtually free of charge or do not require a financial contribution.

Both types of institutions have become instruments of segregation. While the former is used because Roma (disadvantaged) parents are unable to pay for their children's education, the latter is not admitting Roma children, either openly or for some unrealistic reason.

The role and justification of private schools can clearly be explained by the deteriorating quality of the Hungarian public education system. Middle-class parents are fleeing their children to escape this. Although there are private schools using alternative methods that make a declared effort to admit a certain proportion of disadvantaged children - free of tuition fees - this is not the case in rural areas, where parents would have to pay for admission.

The cost of meals in Hungarian public education in 2025:

- The lunch price is usually between EUR 1 and 1.5 per day, while the full day's board (10:00 + lunch + snack) is around EUR 1.8-3.
- This costs EUR 35-50 per month.

However, meals for disadvantaged or severely disadvantaged pupils in nursery and primary schools are free of charge. In secondary school, the discount is 50%.

In Hungary, from the school year 2013/14, primary school textbooks are completely free of charge for all pupils in full-time education in grades 1-8.

Some local authorities provide schooling subsidies for the purchase of equipment for learning. The availability and extent of this depends on the financial situation of the municipality concerned. An application for support must be submitted and will be considered by the mayor (or his/her delegate).

Transport costs to school are not significant, as primary school children tend to attend segregated schools in their own neighbourhood very rarely. Those Roma parents who wish to send their children to a school in a nearby town, for example, in order to receive a higher quality education, tend to be from the more affluent classes. Besides, public transport is free under the age of 14 and 50% discount above that.

It can be said that there are no significant financial obstacles to public education and vocational training.

Non-financial barriers to education

Hungary does not have a shortage of places in education. Rather, the public education system is fragmented, with more institutions and places than needed. The reason for maintaining schools with very low numbers of children in many small settlements is probably related to the social demand for educational segregation: these educational institutions are attended mostly by segregated Roma children, even if it is far from economical to maintain these institutions¹².

The Autonomia Foundation has worked for years with Roma youth in upper primary and vocational schools. Based on field experience, several recurring obstacles hinder their educational success:

¹ <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/hu/eurypedia/hungary/az-oktatasi-rendszer-alapveto-statisztikai-adatai>

² <https://www.ksh.hu/s/kiadvanyok/oktatasi-adatok-2024-2025-elozetes-adatok/index.html>

Nursery & Kindergarten

- **Separation anxiety:** Roma children often aren't weaned before starting kindergarten, making integration challenging. Parents withdraw children due to stress, leading to chronic absenteeism.

Lack of understanding of kindergarten's role: Families from segregated areas have little exposure to mixed social environments, leading to avoidance and anxiety. Integrated settings without guidance often exacerbate this. Although social inclusion training is part of the education of pre-school teachers³ and NGOs are also involved in such programmes⁴, in practice the knowledge acquired is not sufficient to address socio-cultural disadvantage. Furthermore, pre-school teachers are not able to disassociate themselves from the negative attitudes often displayed by the majority society.

Elementary School

- **Poor socialisation skills:** Due to limited or ineffective kindergarten attendance, children start school unprepared, both behaviorally and in terms of cognitive abilities.
- **Undiagnosed learning difficulties:** Roma children often go undiagnosed for dyslexia, ADHD, or other learning disorders due to lack of specialist access (regional inequality) and low awareness among teachers and parents.
- **Frequent absences:** Medical certificates are used routinely to excuse absences, sometimes without real illness. This contributes to school failure and grade repetition.
- **Home environment:** Poor housing conditions and overcrowding make studying at home nearly impossible.
- **Pressure to earn:** Financial hardship pushes children to seek work early, undermining motivation to remain in school.

Vocational and Secondary School

- **Immediate income over qualifications:** Low family income leads young Roma to prefer informal work with quick pay over vocational training, which seems less rewarding.
- **Lack of training placements:** Some companies are reluctant to take on Roma students for internships, limiting practical training opportunities.

Family patterns and attitudes: While parents may encourage school verbally, they rarely provide actual support. Education is often undervalued compared to immediate income because immediate work means immediate income, while vocational training or further education could mean significant income only much later. On the one hand, extreme poverty, and on the other hand, cultural pressures based on consumption, combined with a lack of motivation in the family and peer group. It should be noted that the Hungarian Government has significantly increased the amount and availability of scholarships for vocational training over the last ten years. Yet, partly due to a lack of information and partly due to stronger negative effects, these have not yet achieved a breakthrough.

- **Limited exposure and aspirations:** Young people often only know the jobs practiced in their communities (e.g., bricklayer, hairdresser), which restricts career choices.
- **No local job opportunities:** Many segregated settlements have high unemployment and no demand for skilled labour, making it hard to see the value of training.

³ <https://www.felvi.hu/felveteli/karrierinfo/!Szakleirasok/index.php/szak/80/szakleiras>

⁴ <https://kezenfogva.hu/kep>

School segregation and schools for special needs

One of the most pressing issues in the Hungarian education system is the school segregation of disadvantaged and Roma students. Multiple studies indicate that the level of segregation has been increasing for decades and is exceptionally high by international standards. This significantly contributes to social disparities in student performance. Research shows that segregated schools tend to offer lower-quality education due to the presence of less experienced teachers, insufficient funding, lower teacher expectations, and negative peer norms - all of which jointly reduce student achievement and limit further educational opportunities.

The 2024 research conducted by the ERRC and the Rosa Parks Foundation confirmed a clear connection between Roma origin, social status, and the diagnosis of mild intellectual disability. This linkage does not stem from a genuine lack of ability but rather from the biases present in the diagnostic process. The expert committees conducting assessments often make subjective decisions, where socialization differences outweigh actual performance. Many Roma children are either unjustifiably categorized with special educational needs (SEN) or are excluded from the diagnostic process altogether due to a segregationist mindset. Roma children are overrepresented in special education institutions, leading to structural segregation. The separation based on such diagnoses is one of the most widespread forms of educational disadvantage faced by Roma students.

In Hungary, educational segregation is primarily driven by the residential concentration of the Roma population and by the phenomenon known as "white flight," where higher-status families, exercising school choice, move their children to better-performing schools. This behavior is often fueled by prejudice or by the assumption that a high proportion of Roma students correlates with poor-quality education. The highly fragmented school system and the growing presence of church-run schools, whose admission policies unintentionally support social selection, further exacerbate school-level segregation. According to FRA (2021) data, 44% of Roma students aged 6–15 attended schools where the majority or all of the pupils were Roma. While this represents a 16-percentage-point decrease from 2016, the figures may have been influenced by distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite this, the proportion of so-called "ghetto schools" has increased: in 2018, 369 such institutions were identified, and between 2008 and 2019 their share among general primary schools rose from 10.5% to 15.1%.

In December 2023, the Hungarian government adopted a law on anti-discrimination measures in public education (<https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=a2300092.tv#>). Although the law ostensibly aims to reduce segregation in primary schools, instead of providing direct support or interventions, it introduces a punitive measure: schools where the proportion of disadvantaged students is significantly below the local average are subject to a 10% funding cut. However, the law does not offer any additional resources to schools that enroll a higher proportion of disadvantaged students. The criteria were set in such a way that only 10% of settlements with schools (23 municipalities) fall within the scope of the law, and even among these, only 38 schools would be affected - representing just 1-2% of the national school system. This suggests that the primary goal of the legislation is to formally comply with EU requirements without delivering meaningful change or progress. (Nahalka)

Early school leaving and NEETs

In Hungary, school dropout among Roma youth remains a significant issue, particularly at the secondary education level. According to the latest data, the rate at which Roma students complete secondary education (either through the general secondary school leaving exam or vocational training) lags far behind that of non-Roma students. FRA (2022) reports that 62% of Roma youth aged 18–24 are early school leavers, meaning they have attained at most lower secondary education, compared to 12% in the general Hungarian population. While there is no major difference in dropout rates between Roma boys and girls overall, Roma girls often leave school after 8th grade, especially in rural areas and small settlements (Papp 2021).

According to UNICEF (2021), approximately 52% of Roma youth aged 15–29 are NEETs (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), while this figure is only 13% among their non-Roma peers. Roma women are particularly affected: two-thirds of NEET Roma youth are female, many of whom become mothers in their teenage years and never return to education or enter the labor market (Fejes–Szűcs 2018).

There are also significant regional disparities, with the lowest rates of early school leaving found in Budapest and the highest in Northern Hungary.

The main causes of early school leaving include poverty, school segregation, and discrimination. In segregated schools, the quality of education tends to be lower, teacher expectations are reduced, and prejudiced attitudes are more common (Kertesi–Kézdi 2009; Radó 2018).

Potential remedies include supporting inclusive education, implementing mentorship programs, providing scholarships, and strengthening community-based education models. In the case of Roma girls, it is especially important to promote positive female role models, ensure a safe school environment, and develop programs that combine education with motherhood - such as flexible school schedules and access to childcare.

Antigypsyism in education, training, and lifelong learning

The EU Roma Strategic Framework calls on Member States, including Hungary, to intensify efforts to combat discrimination and hate crimes. According to the FRA's 2021 survey, 27% of Roma respondents in Hungary reported experiencing discrimination in at least one area of life (e.g., employment, education, healthcare) in the previous 12 months. This figure has shown virtually no improvement since 2016. Additionally, 75% of respondents felt they had been discriminated against because of their Roma background.

With regard to hate-motivated harassment, a significant proportion of Roma respondents in Hungary reported experiencing at least one form of harassment (such as offensive remarks, threats, or online abuse) in the previous year. Although there has been some improvement compared to 2016, as in several other countries, the prevalence of harassment remains high. Physical violence, including hitting, pushing, or grabbing, also remained detectable among the Roma population in 2021, although the rate has shown a downward trend compared to 2016. Younger age groups are more exposed to such attacks than older ones.

Precise data on discrimination cases in the field of education are lacking, but over the past ten years Hungary has been condemned multiple times—both nationally and internationally—for discrimination against Roma students in education. Among the legal judgments, the Gyöngyöspata school case is particularly notable: between 2004 and 2017, Roma students at the Nekcsei Demeter Primary School in Gyöngyöspata were taught separately on the ground floor, while non-Roma students were placed on the upper floor. Roma children were excluded from swimming lessons, after-school programs, and often were not allowed to use the upstairs restrooms. In 2011, an ombudsman report found this to be unlawful segregation, and later several court rulings confirmed that ethnic-based separation had occurred in the school, accompanied by a lower quality of education.

In 2018–2019, the court awarded compensation totaling HUF 99 million to 60 Roma students. In May 2020, the Supreme Court (Kúria) upheld the decision. However, by the deadline, the local municipality had not transferred the compensation, offering instead “in-kind” compensation in the form of educational support—which the families refused. The case sparked political debate, with the government labeling the financial compensation as “unjust,” and the Prime Minister and other officials referring to the involvement of civil organizations in the lawsuit as being influenced by the “Soros network.”

The Budapest Institute published a paper in 2024. The main findings are:

- There are significant differences between schools by region and by type of municipality, which undermines equal opportunities.
- The research highlights that disadvantaged pupils, especially Roma pupils, are in segregated institutions or classes, which limits their development opportunities.
- Missing or outdated equipment, inappropriate pedagogical methods, little specialised support and overwork of teachers were also identified.
- Teacher workloads are overstretched and there are not enough specialists for inclusive education and early development, which is also addressed in detail in previous research.

Support for Roma parents

There are no targeted national measures in Hungary specifically designed to support Roma parents in their children's education. While families are entitled to a monthly family allowance (around €56 per child), this benefit is tied to school attendance. However, due to inflation and the unchanged amount for years, its deterrent effect in cases of absenteeism has become negligible.

Disadvantaged and multiply disadvantaged children are eligible for free school meals and textbooks. Additionally, some civil society organizations provide mentoring and parental training, though these efforts remain local and cannot address the broader socio-cultural disadvantages at scale, even if they show positive impact in specific communities.

Scholarship programs exist that help reduce the financial burden of further education. While not Roma-specific, they are accessible to families in poverty, including many Roma households.

Three categories of social welfare benefits can be distinguished based on their target-group: most forms of assistance are linked to financial status – although it is important to note the criticism levelled at the Hungarian government's social policy, which is said to favor the middle class and offer little to those living in deprivation. Among the forms of support linked to income thresholds are school enrollment support and even school meal subsidies. These forms of support can be described as "color blind."

The next category includes forms of support that are mainly available to Roma families, the number of which is limited and, in principle, would also be available to non-Roma families with the same financial status: examples include the extracurricular education ('tanoda' program, early childhood development, and other measures linked to local anti-segregation programs. These do not restrict the target group to Roma in a normative way, but the target group is limited to Roma due to the location of the service.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the housing support system provided by the Hungarian government, which is set to change in 2025 and to which Roma are IN THEORY also entitled, but due to administrative barriers, only a small number and proportion of them are able to take advantage of these opportunities.

That said, progressing through the public education system to reach these scholarships remains challenging, as many Roma children drop out before reaching this stage.

Key Statistics on Roma Children and Households

- Only 33% of Roma children start secondary or vocational education, compared to 90% of non-Roma.
- Less than 1% of Roma attain a university degree.
- Approximately 50% drop out of secondary/vocational school.
- Around 70% of Roma households have no books.
- Fewer than 5% of Roma households have internet access, compared to ~90% of non-Roma households.

These figures highlight the systemic barriers Roma families face in supporting their children's education.

In Hungary, it is less common among Roma families for parents to work abroad, at least not to the same extent as in neighbouring countries.

Educational support measures

In Hungary, the use of school/educational mediators is not a widespread practice. Although mediators have been employed within the framework of a few specific programs, there is currently no unified methodology or normative funding system to support their work. Instead, "tanoda" aims to support disadvantaged students outside the formal education system.

'Tanodas' are compensatory initiatives designed to promote the academic success of disadvantaged students, particularly those of Roma origin. Most of these initiatives are run by civil society organizations and aim to complement school education while reducing educational inequalities.

The creation of 'tanoda' is based on the recognition that the "traditional" school system does not adequately address the specific needs of disadvantaged and Roma students. Tanodas attempt to fill this gap by providing personalized, student-centered support through an alternative approach. They generally operate independently of schools and often in separate physical locations, although their effective functioning relies heavily on close cooperation with public education institutions.

The first 'tanoda' were established in the early 2000s through civil initiatives. After 2010, their operations became increasingly tied to state and EU funding sources (e.g., EFOP projects). According to the TanodaPlatform's 2025 report, in 2023 a total of 188 state-funded tanodas were operating in Hungary, serving 5,409 students, most of whom were in primary school. On average, each *tanoda* served 20–30 children. Approximately 70% of tanodas are maintained by nonprofit organizations, while 28% are operated by churches or church-affiliated nonprofits.

Promotion of Roma culture, history, and language

In Hungary, the teaching of Roma culture is not uniformly regulated and takes place primarily through minority education, certain public education programs, and civil society initiatives. Official Roma minority education—which aims to transmit the Roma language, culture, and history—is available in only a few schools and is mostly conducted in Lovari or Beás, though participation rates remain low (Kóczé, 2011).

The national curriculum does not include mandatory Roma cultural content, so its presence in the classroom largely depends on individual teachers. Roma culture typically appears in textbooks in folkloristic or stereotypical forms, while major historical traumas such as the Porrajmos (Roma Holocaust) are largely absent (Radó, 2021).

At the same time, alternative spaces such as tanodas (after-school programs) and civil organizations often provide more authentic, community-based cultural education. These programs operate outside the formal education system but play a significant role in strengthening Roma identity (TanodaPlatform, 2025).

Roma-related topics are only marginally present in teacher education and professional development, although some university-level Romani Studies programs do exist. Overall, the teaching of Roma culture in Hungary is fragmented and occasional, and a system-level strategy for its comprehensive development is still lacking.

Lifelong learning and the education of adults

Based on data from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office, between 2000 and 2022, participation in education and training among the 25–64 age group in Hungary showed a fluctuating trend.

In the early 2000s, the rate ranged between 3–4%, followed by a steady decline until 2012. Due to a methodological change introduced in 2015, data after this point are only partially comparable with earlier figures. From 2016 to 2019, participation slightly declined, and in 2020 there was a sharp drop as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which online education could not fully compensate for. In 2022, the participation rate increased significantly to 7.9%, marking a 2 percentage point rise compared to the previous year. There was also a notable gender gap: 9.2% of women and 6.7% of men participated in training. Regionally, South Transdanubia had the highest rate at 10.6%, while the lowest was recorded in West Transdanubia (6.4%). No data are available regarding the participation rate of the Roma population.

Based on its own experience, Autonomia raises many issues regarding adult education and vocational training for Roma. On the one hand, the adult population lacks the basic skills (literacy, learning competencies) required for training and vocational education. Furthermore, these training courses pose significant organizational problems, if not raising suspicions of abuse: the start of adult education for those who have completed eight years of elementary school is generally unpredictable and cannot be planned. It can be said that these opportunities are only rarely based on demand, but are much more determined by the timing of development programs (in frequent cases funded by the EU), which also start in an unpredictable manner. Even more rarely do they connect in time with vocational training courses that also enable the acquisition of a profession. The professions that can be acquired almost never match the needs of the local labor market, but rather the offerings of external service providers who make their living from this. At the time of writing, we observed that in a town of 6,000 inhabitants (with a Roma population of approximately 2,000), around 50 people were trained as childcare assistants, even though there are practically no similar job opportunities in this field in the town or the surrounding area. This program was designed by a 'consultant company' who did not have any local experience or local preparatory work.

Overall, it can be said that Roma who leave primary school without acquiring basic competencies and skills are unable to participate in training courses that would enable them to obtain a profession. In addition to this lack of basic skills, another reason for this is that there are hardly any professions valued on the labor market for which people with low levels of education could be trained en masse, and this sector is characterized by poor planning and inadequate accountability, which is often difficult to distinguish from specific financial abuses.

It can be considered a positive change that basket weaving and rag rug making, as "authentic Roma occupations," have now been virtually eliminated from vocational training offerings. Thousands of Roma participated in such training courses without the slightest hope of earning a real income, but mainly with the aim of finding employment.

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

Schools do not equalize social differences, but often reproduce them - children of wealthier, more educated parents are more likely to attend good schools and receive a high-quality education. According to OECD and PISA measurements, Hungary has one of the least inclusive education systems in Europe.

Since public education is unable to compensate for family and social disadvantages, Roma youth enter the labor market with a lack of skills and competencies that makes it very difficult for them to gain entry. Another important factor is their lack of motivation, which stems from numerous experiences of failure and a lack of positive role models, meaning that they never even reach the point of entering the labor market. If they do, without basic skills and work socialization, they are only hired for unskilled jobs at best.

Workplace training opportunities are also open to Roma people if they are in permanent employment. In our opinion, it is not the lack of such training that poses a challenge for many, but rather finding permanent employment. An employer who sees that an employee is motivated and willing to make a long-term commitment will provide training in areas such as forklift operation. Until 2024, there was a relative labor shortage in the country's central, more developed regions, which encouraged employers to retain and develop their employees. This includes Roma employees.

As we mentioned above, the state (or EU) funded trainings organized by the Public Employment Service meet just in rare cases the need of the local labour-market.

In Hungary, school performance is among the most closely linked to family background across OECD countries. Public education often reinforces, rather than reduces, social inequality. Children from wealthier families attend better schools, while disadvantaged students, including many Roma, receive a lower-quality education.

Hungary has one of Europe's least inclusive education systems. As public education fails to compensate for social disadvantages, Roma youth often leave school without the skills needed to enter the labor market. Repeated academic failure and a lack of role models diminish motivation, resulting in either early dropout or entry into only low-skilled jobs - if any.

Overall IT skills are low among Hungarian adults, and Roma youth lag even further behind due to limited access to quality education, tools, and stable internet. Many Roma households lack digital infrastructure and literacy, making it hard to engage in everyday digital services like online banking or job searching - further limiting employment opportunities.

Thanks mainly to initiatives by civil society organizations, more and more schools teaching Roma children have begun to offer robotics classes, which have yielded significant results not only in terms of the children's IT skills but also in terms of developing their basic skills.

Although some EU- and Swiss-funded programs (like EFOP 3.2.4 and DIMOP, SM10-MIN) aimed to improve digital competencies in schools, implementation issues have hindered effectiveness. Interactive whiteboards and IT tools were installed but often unused due to untrained teachers or fear of student misuse. Civil society organizations with deep local knowledge were frequently excluded from these programs, while favoured institutions received disproportionate support.

Despite the potential of these initiatives, poor planning, lack of consultation with affected communities, and politicized grant allocation have prevented meaningful impact—especially in areas where help is most needed.

Education in the National Roma Strategic Framework

The Hungarian National Social Inclusion Strategy 2030 (HNSIS 2030) partially incorporates the EU Roma Strategic Framework. Its 2021–2024 Action Plan outlines educational measures with implementation due by June 2025. Hungary’s education system includes kindergarten, primary, secondary, post-secondary, and higher education, with schooling compulsory until age 16.

Key data shows challenges remain: kindergarten attendance among Roma children fell from 71% in 2016 to 59% in 2021; segregation in primary schools decreased from 60% to 44%, but remains high. Only an estimated 2.2% of Roma youth attend higher education.

Programs such as “Tanoda” (extracurricular support) and Roma dormitories (“Sure Start Program”) aim to help disadvantaged children, especially where integrated education is not feasible. Dormitories support around 350 students annually, offering cultural education, mentoring, and community engagement. Despite their value, these programs reach only a fraction of Roma children.

While HNSIS correctly identifies key issues - such as poor test results among disadvantaged children and regional disparities - it lacks measurable goals and systemic approaches. The strategy fails to follow children through the full education cycle, offering support in isolated stages (e.g. early childhood or primary school) without bridging gaps between them. As a result, children may benefit from early programs like “Sure Start” but later fall behind in segregated primary schools with poor resources.

The plan calls for strengthening school effectiveness and providing free textbooks and subsidized meals. However, these do not address core structural issues such as under-resourced schools or entrenched segregation. While some children benefit from programs and stipends, these act more as patchwork fixes than systemic solutions.

Segregation is only superficially addressed in the Action Plan. Though it mentions “mitigating segregation risk,” there are no concrete steps for desegregation. Meanwhile, state-backed segregation - especially in church-run schools - undermines inclusion efforts.

Anti-Roma racism is also insufficiently addressed. While the HNSIS promotes cultural awareness and anti-discrimination efforts, it avoids explicitly naming antigypsyism. Without tackling this root issue, efforts to create inclusive environments remain limited.

One promising measure is the initiative supporting Romani girls and women, who face additional barriers and higher dropout risks. While the recognition of their challenges is positive, critics note a general lack of intersectional awareness throughout the strategy.

In summary, HNSIS identifies many relevant problems but fails to offer systemic, measurable, and intersectional solutions. The scattered nature of interventions, lack of follow-through across educational stages, and absence of concrete desegregation or anti-racism efforts undermine its potential impact.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In Hungary, school dropout among Roma youth remains a significant issue, particularly at the secondary education level.

Mentoring support for young people with fewer opportunities - the role of a mentor in supporting young people with fewer opportunities goes well beyond skills development: through a relationship of trust, they help to identify complex problems such as mental health, housing or family difficulties and act as a mediator to other professionals who can help. In order to be effective, mentors need to be supported through targeted training, supervision and increased knowledge of the local care system. An integrated, holistic approach to the design of mentoring schemes is essential.

One of the most pressing issues in the Hungarian education system is the school segregation of disadvantaged and Roma students.

Standardising rules for church and state schools and redesigning enrolment boundaries would prevent segregation, including the use of busing where appropriate. Conduct a thorough review of church-run schools and their financing, ensuring transparency and, if needed, steps toward secularisation. The government should also re-engage independent civil society organisations, whose innovative approaches are essential for improving education in disadvantaged Roma communities.

The high level of centralisation of public education does not give teachers the opportunity to choose curricula according to the abilities and competences and skills of the pupils. The amount of curriculum, which is already overly lexical, is the same for children with lower and higher competences regardless if they have or not significant parental support.

It is advisable to give teachers more freedom in the choice of teaching materials and methods. However, this requires increasing the level of teacher competence and motivation.

The training and capacity of teachers is insufficient to provide integrated education for children with special educational needs. The more Roma children there are in a class, the more likely it is that this pedagogical capacity barrier (geographical inequality) is present.

The current uniform allocation of teaching capacity, based only on numbers, should be changed in line with teaching and learning needs, for example by changing the centralised coordination system, increasing the role of local authorities and providing substantial income compensation for teachers of children with special educational needs. At the same time, in addition to the salary supplement that already exists, real mentoring, monitoring and quality assurance of this should be introduced.

Public education alone cannot compensate for family disadvantages. Early Childhood Development (Baby Mama Houses, Sure Start Programme) is a good response, but it does not reach all families and there are children whose family background disadvantage cannot be compensated for.

Increasing the efficiency of public education can only be achieved through radical reform and capacity building of the social care system, where both quality and staffing levels need to be improved. A specific action plan (programme) and the appointment of a responsible governmental actor (independent ministry for education *and* social affairs which are missing) are needed to bring the social care system and public education together.

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