




Employment and employability of Roma in the EU

by Roland Ferkovics and Marek Hojsík

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INTRODUCTION

This report addresses the critical topic of Roma in the labour market in the EU Member States (MSs). The relevance of this analysis is heightened by the need to draw attention to Roma employment challenges, particularly considering the current status/omission of Roma issues from EU/national employment policies. The successful inclusion of Roma into the labour market is crucial not only from the perspectives of human rights, social justice and economic well-being but also for realising the economic potentials of Roma communities, demonstrating why their employment inclusion should also be in the main interest of MSs and could contribute significantly to national economic developments.

Along these lines, two main separate but related approaches shape. The first is a human rights approach that identifies and perceives the labour market challenges Roma face from a legal point of view. To better understand the human rights perspective, it is pivotal to highlight the most prominent international legal framework's anti-discrimination passages. These include the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and, in the case of EU the most legally binding, the Racial Equality Directive (RED) transposed to MSs' national anti-discrimination regulations. All the listed legal frameworks clearly aim to guarantee the principle of prohibition of discrimination. The ICESCR and the RED both dispose about right to work without discrimination and to have "productive employment under conditions safeguarding fundamental political and economic freedoms to the individual".¹ From the human rights approach the discrimination of Roma in the labour market, the pervasive economic exclusion pushing Roma to the margins of the societies clearly are clear acts of violating the principle of prohibition of discrimination. The specific employment related issues Roma have (described in more details below in the text) are also against the prevailing legal frameworks (Racial Equality Directive, ICESCR) disposing about employment related regulations.

The second approach aims to demonstrate the issues from an economic perspective highlighting the potential of Roma using it as a convincing element to MSs to educate, train and employ more Roma. It describes the economic and social potentials of Roma due to the demographic nature of the communities (youth), the number of Roma in Europe (largest minority) putting it in context with the national and EU level economic challenges, the prevailing labour shortages and employment of third country nationals in Europe. Additionally, the potentials of Roma are also perceived as factors that would largely benefit the European economy helping to maintain and operate the states. In other words, it does not explicitly focus on how states and its authorities violate human rights, rather it highlights what the benefit of states and Roma would be if the employment level is significantly higher.

The central challenge to be examined in this report is the persistent difficulty Roma face in achieving economic and social stability via employment. This involves exploring how education and training influence the employability of Roma, detailing the widespread consequences of discrimination in the labour market and analysing the topic along cross-cutting issues such as gender. The report further analyses the relation of economic exclusion to political vulnerability and explores the available job opportunities that indirectly or directly target Roma. The report also assesses the EU approach to the topic and how National Roma Strategic Frameworks (NRSFs) address challenges and describe promising practices for labour market inclusion. It provides a few examples how the challenges of Roma employment and employability are addressed in diverse MSs and identifies elements that are worth of attention.

¹ United Nations, 1966, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights>

1. EU LABOUR MARKET TRENDS

To contextualise and analyse the situation of Roma in the labour market within the EU, which is the main topic of this report, first it is necessary to provide an overview and describe the general EU-wide trends in the labour market.

The EU labour market has demonstrated remarkable resilience in recent years, maintaining strong employment growth and historically low unemployment rates despite several subsequent crises, modest economic activity and structural transformations.² The EU employment rate reached a record high of 75.3% in 2023.³ However, key indicators signal that this period of exceptional strength is beginning to decelerate amidst prevailing economic and geopolitical challenges.

1.1. Employment dynamics and labour supply

The primary driver of recent job creation has been an expansion of the labour force, accounting for approximately 90% of employment growth in 2023. This was notably fuelled by workers with tertiary education, older individuals, and a significant contribution from third-country nationals. Despite strong employment figures, labour and skills shortages remain elevated across the Union, persisting notably in high-demand sectors such as information and communications technologies (ICT) and construction.⁴

Diverse authoritative sources, including the Draghi's report identify a fundamental challenge influencing the long-term labour supply, which is the demographic decline. The EU is entering a period in which economic growth will not be supported by rising populations. The Union's workforce is projected to shrink by close to 2 million workers each year by 2040, emphasising the urgent need for productivity gains to offset declining labour input.⁵

1.2. Productivity gaps and industrial structure

As mentioned above there are signals for a slowing momentum in the labour market that coincides with persistent structural weaknesses, notably concerning efficiency and innovation. Labour productivity growth remains structurally low, having slowed to 0.7% annually in 2023.⁶ Maintaining this rate would only be sufficient to keep GDP constant until 2050, jeopardising the ability to finance social models and key investment priorities. This performance deficit is linked to a significant innovation, and research and development spending gap vis-à-vis competitors such as the United States.⁷

Structural shifts within the economy further complicate productivity prospects: the share of manufacturing's added value has declined faster than its employment share since 2018.⁸ This trend accelerates reliance on the service sector for future efficiency gains. Correspondingly, only 55.6% of adults possess at least basic digital

² European Commission, 2025, Labour Market and Wage Developments in Europe. Available at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/4752398b-a7dc-11f0-a7c5-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

³ European Commission, 2025, Joint Employment Report. Available at: https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/joint-employment-report-2025-0_en

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Mario Draghi, 2024, The future of European competitiveness, European Commission. Available at: https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/97e481fd-2dc3-412d-be4c-f152a8232961_en?filename=The%20future%20of%20European%20competitiveness%20%20A%20competitiveness%20strategy%20for%20Europe.pdf

⁶ European Commission, 2025, Joint Employment Report. Available at: https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/joint-employment-report-2025-0_en

⁷ Mario Draghi, 2024, The future of European competitiveness, European Commission. Available at: https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/97e481fd-2dc3-412d-be4c-f152a8232961_en?filename=The%20future%20of%20European%20competitiveness%20%20A%20competitiveness%20strategy%20for%20Europe.pdf

⁸ European Commission, 2025, Labour Market and Wage Developments in Europe. Available at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/4752398b-a7dc-11f0-a7c5-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

skills, and participation in adult learning (39.5% in 2022) falls far short of the 60% EU headline target for 2030, posing obstacles to upskilling the workforce necessary for the green and digital transitions.⁹

A significant portion of the workforce is concentrated in low-value roles: nearly one-third of jobs remain in low- and medium-wage jobs in low-productivity growth sectors such as transport and hospitality. While the proportion of high-wage, high-productivity jobs has grown, this concentration in low-productivity areas signals an inefficient utilization of human capital, as a relatively high share of high-skilled individuals are employed in low-productivity growth industries.¹⁰

⁹ European Commission, 2025, Joint Employment Report. Available at: https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/joint-employment-report-2025-0_en

¹⁰ European Commission, 2025, Labour Market and Wage Developments in Europe. Available at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/4752398b-a7dc-11f0-a7c5-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

2. ROMA IN THE LABOUR MARKET

2.1. Employment of Roma and NEET

The labour market situation for Roma across the EU is characterised by a significant disparity between their demographic potential and their actual formal economic participation, occurring within a wider European context defined by slowing employment growth and urgent labour shortages.

Despite of the fact that Roma are the largest minority in the EU as well as in Europe, their demographic potential is untapped. Significant portion of Roma are not in paid work within the formal economy¹¹ or less likely to be employed compared to the non-Roma population. The overall employment rate for Roma aged 20-64 across the EU stands at only 54%, according to the most recent 2024 FRA survey.¹² This represents a slight improvement compared to the older data (43% in 2021),¹³ but employment levels are still far behind the general population (75%). Across the surveyed MSs, the rate of employment among Roma varies significantly. In Bulgaria, Hungary and Italy the Roma employment rate¹⁴ is between 60 and 69%; While in other MSs (France, Ireland, Spain) this ratio is far below the national average ranging between 31 and 49%.¹⁵ In Slovakia, the employment rate in 2020 was only 28% in marginalised Roma communities and 47% among Roma living in the mainstream population.¹⁶

This exclusion is often more pronounced for Roma women. The FRA survey shows that the average gender employment gap in the surveyed EU MSs is 31 percentage points.

The problem is particularly acute among youth: 47% of Roma aged 16-24 are categorised as NEETs (Not in Education, Employment or Training) across the surveyed EU MSs.¹⁷ In 2021, this number was 56%,¹⁸ a decreasing trend is projected by this comparison. This figure of the most current NEET rate is nearly five times the EU average, while there are countries where it is even higher (Czechia, Ireland, Slovakia, Spain). Hungary is

¹¹ ERGO Network, 2024, Roma Access to Decent and Sustainable Employment in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Spain. Available at: <https://ergonetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/ERGO-casestudy-nov2024-web-FINAL.pdf>

¹² EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2024, Rights of Roma and Travellers In 13 European Countries — Perspectives from the Roma Survey. Available at: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2025-roma-survey-2024_en.pdf

¹³ Eurodiaconia, 2022, Addressing Barriers for Roma to Access Employment. Available at: <https://www.eurodiaconia.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Addressing-Barriers-for-Roma-to-Access-Employment-version-5-1.pdf>

EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2021, Roma in 10 European Countries — Main Results. Available at: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2022-roma-survey-2021-main-results2_en.pdf

¹⁴ It is pivotal to mention that this number includes full-time, part-time, ad hoc jobs, self-employment, occasional work and any work.

¹⁵ EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2024, Rights of Roma and Travellers In 13 European Countries — Perspectives from the Roma Survey. Available at: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2025-roma-survey-2024_en.pdf

¹⁶ Markovič, F. & Plachá, L., Príjmy a životné podmienky v marginalizovaných rómskych komunitách: Vybrané ukazovatele zo zisťovania EU SILC_MRK 2020 [Income and Living Conditions in Marginalized Roma Communities: Selected Indicators from the Survey EU SILC_MRK 2020]. Bratislava: Úrad splnomocnenca vlády SR pre rómske komunity. Available at: https://www.romovia.vlada.gov.sk/site/assets/files/1563/analyticka_sprava_eu_silc_mrk_2020_elektronicka_final.pdf?csrt=8308248272331438178

¹⁷ EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2024, Rights of Roma and Travellers In 13 European Countries — Perspectives from the Roma Survey. Available at: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2025-roma-survey-2024_en.pdf

¹⁸ EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2021, Roma in 10 European Countries — Main Results. Available at: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2022-roma-survey-2021-main-results2_en.pdf

an outstanding case in this regard, since its NEET rate is the closest to the EURSF's goal. The high NEET rate is problematic both for the Roma as well as for the states from economic perspectives.

2.2. Quality of employment

When Roma are employed, they are typically found in low-paid, poor-quality jobs with insecure contracts and low social status. A significant proportion rely on the informal economy, engaging in activities like scavenging, trading, seasonal work (especially in agriculture and construction), or casual labour for subsistence. This leads to unstable livelihoods, often without social security coverage or entitlements.¹⁹

The precarious nature of Roma employment means many households depend heavily on state support. In the surveyed MSs on average 70% of Roma are at risk of poverty. This represents a significant decrease compared to the 2021 FRA survey (83%), far above the level among the general population (6%).

2021 FRA data²⁰ has demonstrated an important correlation with residential segregation. Engagement in economic activity in the past four weeks declared 50% of surveyed Roma living in non-segregated setting against 39% of segregated Roma. The share of young NEET people was 50% among Roma living in non-segregated setting against 60% among those living in segregated setting. And while the EU-average at risk of poverty level among the general population in the EU was 6%, the risk among segregated Roma was 84% against 81% among non-segregated Roma (but in Croatia, Czechia and Romania, this gap between segregated and non-segregated Roma was larger than 10%).²¹

2.3. Relation of education and training to employment

Education stands as a critical determinant of employment outcomes and for economic inclusion in general as well as for the Roma population across Europe. A pervasive and stark educational gap exists between the Roma community and the majority population, profoundly limiting their opportunities in the labour market.²²

As mentioned above the employment rate for Roma aged 20-64 across the EU is only 43%,²³ primarily due to their low average skill level, which is directly tied to deficiencies in the education system.²⁴ Achieving higher levels of education is strongly associated with better labour market success for both Roma and non-Roma

¹⁹ Eurodiaconia, 2022, Addressing Barriers for Roma to Access Employment. Available at: <https://www.eurodiaconia.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Addressing-Barriers-for-Roma-to-Access-Employment-version-5-1.pdf>

ERGO Network, 2024, Roma Access to Decent and Sustainable Employment in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Spain. Available at: <https://ergonetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/ERGO-casestudy-nov2024-web-FINAL.pdf>

Romaversitas and ERGO Network, 2024, Desk research on the situation in the labour market of the Roma population and the Roma Women. Available at: <https://ergonetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Desk-research-on-the-situation-at-the-labour-market-of-the-Roma-population-Romaversitas-1.pdf>

²⁰ Analysis of the newest 2024 data from this perspective is not available yet.

²¹ Ivanov, A., 2022, Roma Survey 2021: Headline indicators by neighbourhood. (Presentation dated 30 November 2022, provided by the author).

²² European Commission, 2025, Joint Employment Report. Available at: https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/joint-employment-report-2025-0_en

²³ EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2024, Rights of Roma and Travellers In 13 European Countries — Perspectives from the Roma Survey. Available at: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2025-roma-survey-2024_en.pdf

²⁴ Roma Civil Monitor, 2019, A synthesis of civil society's reports on the implementation of national Roma integration strategies in the European Union, Publication Office of the European Union. Available at: <https://cps.ceu.edu/sites/cps.ceu.edu/files/attachment/basicpage/3172/rcm-civil-society-monitoring-report-synthesis27-2019-eprint-fin.pdf>

populations.²⁵ However, less than one-third of Roma youth aged 20-24 have completed at least upper-secondary education, compared to 84% of the general EU population.²⁶ Moreover, only 1% of Roma complete tertiary education due to persistent barriers.²⁷

Higher educational attainment increases the probability of finding a stable, well-paid job, offering economic security and access to social protection²⁸ as well as a necessary element to address the high level of NEET of Roma youth as described above. Furthermore, successfully tackling the education challenge is fundamental because the economic potential of the young Roma demographic is essential for countering Europe's accelerating workforce decline.²⁹

2.4. Low quality education and segregation

The pervasive issue of low quality and segregated education profoundly and negatively impacts Roma employment prospects, creating structural disadvantages that persist throughout their lives.³⁰ Educational segregation can be described as the concentration of Roma students in certain schools or classes that is either the result of de facto residential segregation or, the outcome of continuous practices of school authorities. In segregated institutions/classes the quality of education is significantly lower that is related to reduced school curricula and inadequate school infrastructure.³¹ Additionally, low quality education severely compromises a student's potential for further learning reinforced by a lack of resources, equipment, qualified staff, and positive

²⁵ Romaversitas and ERGO Network, 2024, Desk research on the situation in the labour market of the Roma population and the Roma Women. Available at: <https://ergonetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Desk-research-on-the-situation-at-the-labour-market-of-the-Roma-population-Romaversitas-1.pdf>

²⁶ EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2024, Rights of Roma and Travellers In 13 European Countries — Perspectives from the Roma Survey. Available at: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2025-roma-survey-2024_en.pdf

²⁷ Roma Foundation for Europe, 2025, The Ten Billion Euro Opportunity: Unlocking the Potential of Roma Youth. Available at: https://romaforeurope-prod.ams3.digitaloceanspaces.com/%2Fcms-assets/files/%2F6866978f-ae8f-4e75-b205-59deb515ca5e?response-content-disposition=inline%3B%20filename%3D%22Roma%20Boosting%20the%20EU%20Economy%20250512_9%20DIGITAL_ENG.pdf%22%3B%20filename%2A%3DUTF-8%27%27Roma%2520Boosting%2520the%2520EU%2520Economy%2520250512_9%2520DIGITAL_ENG.pdf&response-content-type=application%2Fpdf&X-Amz-Algorithm=AWS4-HMAC-SHA256&X-Amz-Date=20251210T121531Z&X-Amz-SignedHeaders=host&X-Amz-Expires=60&X-Amz-Credential=DQ00TKLJW2Y7267L4HN6%2F20251210%2Fams3%2Fs3%2Faws4_request&X-Amz-Signature=e3c6b5a2ce068940b0cde3bf47c9ec9a9666d99b5240d1f93f14b424397eede7

²⁸ Roma Civil Monitor, 2025, Civil society monitoring report on the implementation of the national strategic framework for Roma equality, inclusion, and participation in Czechia, Publication Office of the European Union. Available at: <https://www.romacivilmonitoring.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/RCM2-2024-C1-Czechia-FINAL-ISBN.pdf>

²⁹ Roma Foundation for Europe, 2025, The Ten Billion Euro Opportunity: Unlocking the Potential of Roma Youth. Available at: https://romaforeurope-prod.ams3.digitaloceanspaces.com/%2Fcms-assets/files/%2F6866978f-ae8f-4e75-b205-59deb515ca5e?response-content-disposition=inline%3B%20filename%3D%22Roma%20Boosting%20the%20EU%20Economy%20250512_9%20DIGITAL_ENG.pdf%22%3B%20filename%2A%3DUTF-8%27%27Roma%2520Boosting%2520the%2520EU%2520Economy%2520250512_9%2520DIGITAL_ENG.pdf&response-content-type=application%2Fpdf&X-Amz-Algorithm=AWS4-HMAC-SHA256&X-Amz-Date=20251210T121531Z&X-Amz-SignedHeaders=host&X-Amz-Expires=60&X-Amz-Credential=DQ00TKLJW2Y7267L4HN6%2F20251210%2Fams3%2Fs3%2Faws4_request&X-Amz-Signature=e3c6b5a2ce068940b0cde3bf47c9ec9a9666d99b5240d1f93f14b424397eede7

³⁰ Roma Civil Monitor, 2025, Civil society monitoring report on the implementation of the national strategic framework for Roma equality, inclusion, and participation in Croatia, Publication Office of the European Union. Available at: <https://www.romacivilmonitoring.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/RCM2-2024-C3-Croatia-FINAL-ISBN.pdf>

Roma Civil Monitor, 2019, A synthesis of civil society's reports on the implementation of national Roma integration strategies in the European Union, Publication Office of the European Union. Available at: <https://cps.ceu.edu/sites/cps.ceu.edu/files/attachment/basicpage/3172/rcm-civil-society-monitoring-report-synthesis27-2019-eprint-fin.pdf>

³¹ Council of Europe, 2025, Annual Report on ECRI's Activities. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/annual-report-on-ecri-s-activities-covering-the-period-from-1-january-/1680b5bcd9>

expectations in such settings.³² Consequently, segregated education is a key factor inhibiting successful long-term labour market participation.³³

School segregation is strongly linked to the residential segregation in all surveyed countries, with an EU average gap of 49%; 63% children from segregated housing are educated in segregated schools, while among non-segregated population, this number is only 14%.³⁴

The extent of educational segregation is concerning, since almost every second Roma child (46%) is educated in a school where all or most pupils are Roma across the surveyed EU MSs.³⁵ The segregation is particularly pronounced in some MSs, such as Bulgaria (where 71% of children are educated in classes where all or majority of classmates are Roma), Czechia (51%), Greece (58%), Hungary (60%), Romania (48%).³⁶ In Slovakia, available data are disaggregated by degree of integration: 70% of children from marginalised Roma communities and 47% of children from families living among mainstream population are educated in classes where all or majority of classmates are Roma.³⁷

In several countries (Croatia, Czechia, Germany, Hungary, Slovakia) Roma students are streamed into special schools or classes (often under the pretext of language deficits or inappropriate social behaviour), a placement that experts argue is often based on discriminatory, antigypsyist grounds rather than genuine developmental needs.³⁸ This inappropriate placement denies children access to quality education and inhibits continuing education beyond compulsory schooling, thereby limiting their chances of successful labour market participation.³⁹

³² Center for Policy Studies, Vera Messing and Zsuzsa Arendas with Contribution of Boyan Zahariev, 2017 Roma employment and the potentials of state and business actors in labor market inclusion. Available at: <https://cps.ceu.edu/sites/cps.ceu.edu/files/attachment/publication/3007/cps-working-paper-bridge-business-soa-2017.pdf>

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Ivanov, A., 2022, Roma Survey 2021: Headline indicators by neighbourhood. (Presentation dated 30 November 2022, provided by the author).

³⁵ EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2024, Rights of Roma and Travellers In 13 European Countries — Perspectives from the Roma Survey. Available at: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2025-roma-survey-2024_en.pdf

³⁶ Markovič, F. & Plachá, L., Príjmy a životné podmienky v marginalizovaných rómskych komunitách: Vybrané ukazovatele zo zisťovania EU SILC_MRK 2020 [Income and Living Conditions in Marginalized Roma Communities: Selected Indicators from the Survey EU SILC_MRK 2020]. Bratislava: Úrad splnomocnenca vlády SR pre rómske komunity, p. 30. Available at: https://www.romovia.vlada.gov.sk/site/assets/files/1563/analyticka_sprava_eu_silc_mrk_2020_elektronicka_final.pdf?csrt=8308248272331438178

³⁷ Ivanov, A., 2022, Roma Survey 2021: Headline indicators by neighbourhood. (Presentation dated 30 November 2022, provided by the author).

³⁸ Roma Civil Monitor, 2025, Civil society monitoring report on the implementation of the national strategic framework for Roma equality, inclusion, and participation in Croatia, Publication Office of the European Union. Available at: <https://www.romacivilmonitoring.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/RCM2-2024-C3-Croatia-FINAL-ISBN.pdf>

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Roma Civil Monitor, 2025, Civil society monitoring report on the implementation of the national strategic framework for Roma equality, inclusion, and participation in Slovakia, Publication Office of the European Union. Available at: <https://www.romacivilmonitoring.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/RCM2-2024-C1-Slovakia-FINAL-ISBN.pdf>

European Roma Rights Centre, 2024, Hungary: new research reveals the stubborn persistence of segregation of Romani pupils. Available at: <https://www.errc.org/news/hungary-new-research-reveals-the-stubborn-persistence-of-segregation-of-romani-pupils>

³⁹ Center for Policy Studies, Vera Messing and Zsuzsa Arendas with Contribution of Boyan Zahariev, 2017 Roma employment and the potentials of state and business actors in labor market inclusion. Available at: <https://cps.ceu.edu/sites/cps.ceu.edu/files/attachment/publication/3007/cps-working-paper-bridge-business-soa-2017.pdf>

But school segregation happens both in special education system and in mainstream schools, where Roma pupils concentrate because of residential segregation, selective parental school choice, demographic trends or “white flight” (once schools develop a reputation for being “Roma schools”, their ethnic composition tends to self-reinforce, as many non-Roma parents opt to enrol their children elsewhere).

2.5. Training and skills acquisition

Despite the education illusion that formal education alone guarantees success, upskilling and professional training are critical instruments for increasing the employability of the Roma workforce, especially in the context of wide-spread labour and skills shortages across Europe.⁴⁰

Targeted vocational education and training (VET) programmes are highly effective, particularly when focused on deficit occupations (jobs facing labour shortages). Programmes designed to train Roma youth for high-demand roles often deliver a high return on investment, frequently recouping their costs through wage tax gains within one to four years. These successful programmes often focus on occupations that require practical skills acquired over short periods, such as construction labourer, machine operator, or beautician.⁴¹

However, the effectiveness of training depends on several factors:

- Accessibility and Basic Skills: For illiterate or low-skilled Roma, training must be linked to basic skills training (literacy and numeracy), vocational counselling, and adequate support services (e.g., childcare or transportation).⁴²
- Quality and Relevance: Training courses must be aligned with actual labour market needs to prevent Roma from being funnelled into low-demand professions.⁴³ A negative example for training targeting Roma are the vocational, ‘F’ study programmes in Slovakia, which are often located in segregated Roma-only schools or classes, and which train students in low-skilled work with little demand on the labour market.⁴⁴ Such type of interventions does not align with the need of Roma for entering the labour market and ensuring stable adequate income.

Roma Civil Monitor, 2019, A synthesis of civil society’s reports on the implementation of national Roma integration strategies in the European Union, Publication Office of the European Union. Available at: <https://cps.ceu.edu/sites/cps.ceu.edu/files/attachment/basicpage/3172/rcm-civil-society-monitoring-report-synthesis27-2019-eprint-fin.pdf>

⁴⁰ Roma Foundation for Europe, 2025, The Ten Billion Euro Opportunity: Unlocking the Potential of Roma Youth. Available at: https://romaforeurope-prod.ams3.digitaloceanspaces.com/%2Fcms-assets/files/%2F6866978f-ae8f-4e75-b205-59deb515ca5e?response-content-disposition=inline%3B%20filename%3D%22Roma%20Boosting%20the%20EU%20Economy%20250512_9%20DIGITAL_ENG.pdf%22%3B%20filename%2A%3DUTF-8%27%27Roma%2520Boosting%2520the%2520EU%2520Economy%2520250512_9%2520DIGITAL_ENG.pdf&response-content-type=application%2Fpdf&X-Amz-Algorithm=AWS4-HMAC-SHA256&X-Amz-Date=20251210T121531Z&X-Amz-SignedHeaders=host&X-Amz-Expires=60&X-Amz-Credential=DO00TKLJW2Y7267L4HN6%2F20251210%2Fams3%2Fs3%2Faws4_request&X-Amz-Signature=e3c6b5a2ce068940b0cde3bf47c9ec9a9666d99b5240d1f93f14b424397eede7

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid

Roma Civil Monitor, 2019, A synthesis of civil society’s reports on the implementation of national Roma integration strategies in the European Union, Publication Office of the European Union. Available at: <https://cps.ceu.edu/sites/cps.ceu.edu/files/attachment/basicpage/3172/rcm-civil-society-monitoring-report-synthesis27-2019-eprint-fin.pdf>

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Roma Civil Monitor, 2019, Civil society monitoring report on implementation of the national Roma integration strategy in Slovakia: Assessing the progress in four key policy areas of the strategy, Publication Office of the European Union. Available at: <https://www.romacivilmonitoring.eu/pdf/rcm-civil-society-monitoring-report-2-slovakia-2018-eprint-fin-3.pdf>

- Structural Support: Training must overcome indebtedness traps and welfare disincentives that make formal, low wage work financially unattractive.⁴⁵ For instance, many Roma are already engaged in informal work to manage the everyday life and have no opportunity to commit themselves to any type of education or training that would be beneficial in the long run. These challenges include lack of time (as of being busy in informal work), cannot afford school supplies or difficulties with transportation between the residence and place of training.⁴⁶

Ultimately, training programmes must be scaled up and supported by targeted investment and delivered in partnership with Roma-led organisations to ensure they are competent,⁴⁷ reflecting to the needs of Roma and effectively reach communities facing structural exclusion.

2.6. Discrimination in the labour market

Discrimination remains one of the most acute structural barriers preventing the Roma population from achieving socio-economic equality, despite numerous legal and policy frameworks aimed at promoting inclusion across the EU. This systemic disadvantage, often rooted in deeply entrenched anti-Roma sentiment (antigypsyism) impacts nearly every aspect of the employment lifecycle, from recruitment and job quality to career progression and income security.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Roma Foundation for Europe, 2025, The Ten Billion Euro Opportunity: Unlocking the Potential of Roma Youth. Available at: https://romaforeurope-prod.ams3.digitaloceanspaces.com/%2Fcms-assets/files/%2F6866978f-ae8f-4e75-b205-59deb515ca5e?response-content-disposition=inline%3B%20filename%3D%22Roma%20Boosting%20the%20EU%20Economy%20250512_9%20DIGITAL_ENG.pdf%22%3B%20filename%2A%3DUTF-8%27%27Roma%2520Boosting%2520the%2520EU%2520Economy%2520250512_9%2520DIGITAL_ENG.pdf&response-content-type=application%2Fpdf&X-Amz-Algorithm=AWS4-HMAC-SHA256&X-Amz-Date=20251210T121531Z&X-Amz-SignedHeaders=host&X-Amz-Expires=60&X-Amz-Credential=DO00TKLJW2Y7267L4HN6%2F20251210%2Fams3%2Fs3%2Faws4_request&X-Amz-Signature=e3c6b5a2ce068940b0cde3bf47c9ec9a9666d99b5240d1f93f14b424397eede7

Roma Civil Monitor, RCM Thematic Fiche – Employment, Central European University. Available at: <https://cps.ceu.edu/sites/cps.ceu.edu/files/attachment/basicpage/3172/rcm-thematic-fiche-employment.pdf>

⁴⁶ Roma Foundation for Europe, 2025, The Ten Billion Euro Opportunity: Unlocking the Potential of Roma Youth. Available at: https://romaforeurope-prod.ams3.digitaloceanspaces.com/%2Fcms-assets/files/%2F6866978f-ae8f-4e75-b205-59deb515ca5e?response-content-disposition=inline%3B%20filename%3D%22Roma%20Boosting%20the%20EU%20Economy%20250512_9%20DIGITAL_ENG.pdf%22%3B%20filename%2A%3DUTF-8%27%27Roma%2520Boosting%2520the%2520EU%2520Economy%2520250512_9%2520DIGITAL_ENG.pdf&response-content-type=application%2Fpdf&X-Amz-Algorithm=AWS4-HMAC-SHA256&X-Amz-Date=20251210T121531Z&X-Amz-SignedHeaders=host&X-Amz-Expires=60&X-Amz-Credential=DO00TKLJW2Y7267L4HN6%2F20251210%2Fams3%2Fs3%2Faws4_request&X-Amz-Signature=e3c6b5a2ce068940b0cde3bf47c9ec9a9666d99b5240d1f93f14b424397eede7

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2024, Rights of Roma and Travellers In 13 European Countries — Perspectives from the Roma Survey. Available at: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2025-roma-survey-2024_en.pdf

Roma Civil Monitor, 2019, A synthesis of civil society's reports on the implementation of national Roma integration strategies in the European Union, Publication Office of the European Union. Available at: <https://cps.ceu.edu/sites/cps.ceu.edu/files/attachment/basicpage/3172/rcm-civil-society-monitoring-report-synthesis27-2019-eprint-fin.pdf>

Roma Foundation for Europe, 2025, The Ten Billion Euro Opportunity: Unlocking the Potential of Roma Youth. Available at: https://romaforeurope-prod.ams3.digitaloceanspaces.com/%2Fcms-assets/files/%2F6866978f-ae8f-4e75-b205-59deb515ca5e?response-content-disposition=inline%3B%20filename%3D%22Roma%20Boosting%20the%20EU%20Economy%20250512_9%20DIGITAL_ENG.pdf%22%3B%20filename%2A%3DUTF-8%27%27Roma%2520Boosting%2520the%2520EU%2520Economy%2520250512_9%2520DIGITAL_ENG.pdf&response-content-type=application%2Fpdf&X-Amz-Algorithm=AWS4-HMAC-SHA256&X-Amz-Date=20251210T121531Z&X-Amz-SignedHeaders=host&X-Amz-Expires=60&X-Amz-Credential=DO00TKLJW2Y7267L4HN6%2F20251210%2Fams3%2Fs3%2Faws4_request&X-Amz-Signature=e3c6b5a2ce068940b0cde3bf47c9ec9a9666d99b5240d1f93f14b424397eede7

Discrimination against Roma individuals in the labour market is a widespread phenomenon, often manifesting as either overt exclusion or institutional bias:

- Discrimination and antigypsyism is particularly severe at the recruitment phase (exclusion at entry),⁴⁹ where employers frequently refuse to hire Roma based on prejudice and stereotypes, regardless of the applicant's qualifications or education.⁵⁰ This phenomenon is substantiated by research, that 36% of Roma over the age of 16 reported discrimination when looking for work. In some countries, the rate is alarmingly high, such as in Ireland (84%), Portugal (70%), Italy (66%), and Greece (61%). This rate of discrimination when looking for a job is double the figure reported in 2016 (36% in 2024 versus 16% in 2016), indicating a worsening trend across several Member States.⁵¹
- Even when employed, Roma face discrimination in the workplace, experiencing lower pay for equal work (ethnic pay gap), fewer opportunities for training and promotion, and exposure to insecure dangerous type of jobs and precarious contracts.⁵² The percentage of Roma experiencing workplace discrimination in the surveyed MSs has also risen sharply, from 5% in 2016 to 22% in 2024.⁵³ This unequal treatment pushes many Roma into the informal economy, where wages are low, unstable, and lack social security coverage.⁵⁴
- To cope with pervasive bias, many Roma conceal their ethnic identity when applying for jobs or in the workplace, a self-protective measure that reinforces the social and economic marginalisation of the community.⁵⁵ Roma employees also tend to hide their identify as of the matter of promotion and

[Credential=D000TKLJW2Y7267L4HN6%2F20251210%2Fams3%2Fs3%2Faws4_request&X-Amz-Signature=e3c6b5a2ce068940b0cde3bf47c9ec9a9666d99b5240d1f93f14b424397eede7](https://ergonetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/ERGO-casestudy-nov2024-web-FINAL.pdf)

⁴⁹ ERGO Network, 2024, Roma Access to Decent and Sustainable Employment in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Spain. Available at: <https://ergonetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/ERGO-casestudy-nov2024-web-FINAL.pdf>

⁵⁰ Center for Policy Studies, Vera Messing and Zsuzsa Arendas with Contribution of Boyan Zahariev, 2017 Roma employment and the potentials of state and business actors in labour market inclusion. Available at: <https://cps.ceu.edu/sites/cps.ceu.edu/files/attachment/publication/3007/cps-working-paper-bridge-business-soa-2017.pdf>

⁵¹ EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2024, Rights of Roma and Travellers In 13 European Countries — Perspectives from the Roma Survey. Available at: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2025-roma-survey-2024_en.pdf

⁵² ERGO Network, 2024, Roma Access to Decent and Sustainable Employment in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Spain. Available at: <https://ergonetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/ERGO-casestudy-nov2024-web-FINAL.pdf>

Roma Civil Monitor, 2025, Civil society monitoring report on the implementation of the national strategic framework for Roma equality, inclusion, and participation in Germany, Publication Office of the European Union. Available at: <https://www.romacivilmonitoring.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/RCM2-2024-C2-Germany-FINAL-ISBN.pdf>

⁵³ EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2024, Rights of Roma and Travellers In 13 European Countries — Perspectives from the Roma Survey. Available at: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2025-roma-survey-2024_en.pdf

⁵⁴ ERGO Network, 2024, Roma Access to Decent and Sustainable Employment in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Spain. Available at: <https://ergonetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/ERGO-casestudy-nov2024-web-FINAL.pdf>

⁵⁵ Roma Civil Monitor, 2025, Civil society monitoring report on the implementation of the national strategic framework for Roma equality, inclusion, and participation in Germany, Publication Office of the European Union. Available at: <https://www.romacivilmonitoring.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/RCM2-2024-C2-Germany-FINAL-ISBN.pdf>

Roma Civil Monitor, 2025, Civil society monitoring report on the implementation of the national strategic framework for Roma equality, inclusion, and participation in Sweden, Publication Office of the European Union. Available at: <https://www.romacivilmonitoring.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/RCM2-2024-C3-Sweden-FINAL-ISBN.pdf>

ERGO Network, 2024, Roma Access to Decent and Sustainable Employment in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Spain. Available at: <https://ergonetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/ERGO-casestudy-nov2024-web-FINAL.pdf>

reaching better positions. Due to pervasive antigypsyism, it is more likely to promote a non-Roma employee to a position than a Roma even if both are professionally on the same level.

2.7. Consequences of discrimination

The enduring presence of labour market discrimination and antigypsyism yields profound and multifaceted consequences for both the Roma and the broader state economy.⁵⁶

As for the Roma, it creates, maintains and reinforces systemic exclusion, leading to severely disadvantaged socio-economic outcomes such as the high unemployment of Roma and vulnerability of subgroups (women and youth), NEET and high at-risk-of-poverty rates. These specific issues have been discussed in more detail above.

As for the MSs, the exclusion resulting from discrimination and antigypsyism carries substantial economic and fiscal penalties, particularly against a backdrop of accelerating demographic decline across the EU.⁵⁷ These include:

- productivity loss: Low productivity growth across the EU, a trend that must be reversed to maintain global competitiveness, is directly hampered by the underutilisation of highly educated workers,⁵⁸ and the persistent skill mismatches created by the exclusion of groups like the Roma.⁵⁹
- labour shortages: As the EU workforce is projected to shrink dramatically (by nearly 2 million workers annually by 2040),⁶⁰ the failure to integrate young Roma exacerbates critical labour shortages in

⁵⁶ Roma Foundation for Europe, 2025, The Ten Billion Euro Opportunity: Unlocking the Potential of Roma Youth. Available at: https://romaforeurope-prod.ams3.digitaloceanspaces.com/%2Fcms-assets/files/%2F6866978f-ae8f-4e75-b205-59deb515ca5e?response-content-disposition=inline%3B%20filename%3D%22Roma%20Boosting%20the%20EU%20Economy%20250512_9%20DIGITAL_ENG.pdf%22%3B%20filename%2A%3DUTF-8%27%27Roma%2520Boosting%2520the%2520EU%2520Economy%2520250512_9%2520DIGITAL_ENG.pdf&response-content-type=application%2Fpdf&X-Amz-Algorithm=AWS4-HMAC-SHA256&X-Amz-Date=20251210T121531Z&X-Amz-SignedHeaders=host&X-Amz-Expires=60&X-Amz-Credential=D000TKLJW2Y7267L4HN6%2F20251210%2Fams3%2Fs3%2Faws4_request&X-Amz-Signature=e3c6b5a2ce068940b0cde3bf47c9ec9a9666d99b5240d1f93f14b424397eede7

⁵⁷ Ibid

Romaversitas and ERGO Network, 2024, Desk research on the situation in the labour market of the Roma population and the Roma Women. Available at: <https://ergonetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Desk-research-on-the-situation-at-the-labour-market-of-the-Roma-population-Romaversitas-1.pdf>

⁵⁸ Mario Draghi, 2024, The future of European competitiveness, European Commission. Available at: https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/97e481fd-2dc3-412d-be4c-f152a8232961_en?filename=The%20future%20of%20European%20competitiveness%20%20A%20competitiveness%20strategy%20for%20Europe.pdf

⁵⁹ Roma Foundation for Europe, 2025, The Ten Billion Euro Opportunity: Unlocking the Potential of Roma Youth. Available at: https://romaforeurope-prod.ams3.digitaloceanspaces.com/%2Fcms-assets/files/%2F6866978f-ae8f-4e75-b205-59deb515ca5e?response-content-disposition=inline%3B%20filename%3D%22Roma%20Boosting%20the%20EU%20Economy%20250512_9%20DIGITAL_ENG.pdf%22%3B%20filename%2A%3DUTF-8%27%27Roma%2520Boosting%2520the%2520EU%2520Economy%2520250512_9%2520DIGITAL_ENG.pdf&response-content-type=application%2Fpdf&X-Amz-Algorithm=AWS4-HMAC-SHA256&X-Amz-Date=20251210T121531Z&X-Amz-SignedHeaders=host&X-Amz-Expires=60&X-Amz-Credential=D000TKLJW2Y7267L4HN6%2F20251210%2Fams3%2Fs3%2Faws4_request&X-Amz-Signature=e3c6b5a2ce068940b0cde3bf47c9ec9a9666d99b5240d1f93f14b424397eede7

⁶⁰ Mario Draghi, 2024, The future of European competitiveness, European Commission. Available at: https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/97e481fd-2dc3-412d-be4c-f152a8232961_en?filename=The%20future%20of%20European%20competitiveness%20%20A%20competitiveness%20strategy%20for%20Europe.pdf

sectors demanding both low- and high-skilled workers.⁶¹ This leads to paradoxical outcome – the same countries face at the same time both lack of workforce (with the need to import it from third countries) and low labour market participation of their citizens.

- fiscal burden: The cost of persistent exclusion is immense. The cost of NEETs alone is estimated at over 150 billion EUR per year across the EU in lost productivity and increased welfare expenditure. Conversely, achieving employment parity for Roma citizens could generate substantial annual GDP increases: an estimated 10.33 billion EUR in Romania, 3.49 billion EUR in Slovakia, and 1.95 billion EUR in Bulgaria. Investing in training for Roma youth can yield returns in as little as one to four years, solely through wage tax gains.⁶²

The persistent discrimination against Roma in the labour market is both the violation of human rights undermining social justice and an economic defeat for Europe.

2.8. Relation of economic exclusion to political vulnerability

Economic disadvantage fundamentally compromises the political agency and participation of the Roma community.

Reliance on the formal welfare system and non-employment-related income sources, which constitute a significant share of household income, reduces economic autonomy and increases dependence on state support. This financial dependence often leads to Roma being viewed as passive “objects of intervention” rather than as active participants in the design and execution of policies that affect their lives.⁶³

Secondly, poverty creates structural barriers to effective civic and political participation. Furthermore, economic hardship often intersects with administrative barriers, such as lacking stable addresses, which is necessary for full civic inclusion.⁶⁴

Finally, persistent discrimination and unmet needs contribute to very low levels of trust in key state institutions, including the police and legal systems (49% for Roma compared to 73% of EU average),⁶⁵ which hinders the reporting of rights violations and systemic injustice. This political invisibility and institutional distrust are further exacerbated by a pervasive hostile public and political climate marked by antigypsism. Thus, economic exclusion compromises the ability of Roma citizens to hold institutions accountable and advocate for the structural changes necessary to realise equality and inclusion.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Roma Foundation for Europe, 2025, The Ten Billion Euro Opportunity: Unlocking the Potential of Roma Youth. Available at: https://romaforeurope-prod.ams3.digitaloceanspaces.com/%2Fcms-assets/files/%2F6866978f-ae8f-4e75-b205-59deb515ca5e?response-content-disposition=inline%3B%20filename%3D%22Roma%20Boosting%20the%20EU%20Economy%20250512_9%20DIGITAL_ENG.pdf%22%3B%20filename%2A%3DUTF-8%27%27Roma%2520Boosting%2520the%2520EU%2520Economy%2520250512_9%2520DIGITAL_ENG.pdf&response-content-type=application%2Fpdf&X-Amz-Algorithm=AWS4-HMAC-SHA256&X-Amz-Date=20251210T121531Z&X-Amz-SignedHeaders=host&X-Amz-Expires=60&X-Amz-Credential=DO00TKLJW2Y7267L4HNG%2F20251210%2Fams3%2Fs3%2Faws4_request&X-Amz-Signature=e3c6b5a2ce068940b0cde3bf47c9ec9a9666d99b5240d1f93f14b424397eede7

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Roma Civil Monitor, 2025, Civil society monitoring report on the implementation of the national strategic framework for Roma equality, inclusion, and participation in Bulgaria, Publication Office of the European Union. Available at: <https://www.romacivilmonitoring.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/RCM2-2024-C1-Bulgaria-FINAL-ISBN.pdf>

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2024, Rights of Roma and Travellers In 13 European Countries — Perspectives from the Roma Survey. Available at: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2025-roma-survey-2024_en.pdf

⁶⁶ Roma Civil Monitor, 2025, Civil society monitoring report on the implementation of the national strategic framework for Roma equality, inclusion, and participation in Bulgaria, Publication Office of the European Union. Available at: <https://www.romacivilmonitoring.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/RCM2-2024-C1-Bulgaria-FINAL-ISBN.pdf>

3. EMPLOYMENT OF ROMA IN EURSF AND NRSFs

3.1. Roma employment in EU policy documents

The EU Roma Strategic Framework 2020-2030 (EURSF) and the 2021 Council Recommendation for Equality, Inclusion and Participation jointly define Roma employment and employability as a core pillar of socio-economic inclusion, framed through a combined equality, inclusion and participation approach. Both instruments explicitly recognise that employment gaps are driven not only by low skills and limited labour demand, but by structural discrimination, segregation in education and place of residence, and gendered barriers affecting Roma women in particular.

The EURSF sets an EU-level sectoral objective to increase effective equal access to quality and sustainable employment. This is operationalised through measurable headline targets to be achieved by 2030. The employment rate gap between Roma and the general population was to be cut by at least half, with a specific target of at least 60% of Roma aged 20-64 being in paid work. In parallel, the gender employment gap among Roma was to be halved, with a minimum target of 45% employment among Roma women. A third quantitative target addressed youth employability, aiming to reduce the NEET rate among Roma youth to below one third, again by halving the existing gap relative to the general population (EU).

Data from the latest FRA Roma survey indicate that only four MSs are likely to achieve the EU goals in the field of employment – Bulgaria, Hungary, Italy and Romania.⁶⁷ Thanks to the fact that this group includes several countries with the largest Roma populations, it is likely that the EU goals will be reached, too. However, it is important to note, that other countries where the problem of Roma labour market exclusion is also acute, are not part of this positive trend or data on Roma are not collected. Also, noteworthy, the positive trend in Roma employment can be attributed rather to the overall labour market development marked by post-Covid recovery (Bulgaria) shortage of labour force (Czechia, Croatia, Hungary) than policy reforms or specific governmental efforts.⁶⁸

The 2021 Council Recommendation translated these objectives into a comprehensive menu of policy measures to be implemented at national level. It emphasised outreach to young Roma, personalised activation pathways, support for first work experience, apprenticeships and dual education, and systematic links between employment services and social support. Importantly, it embedded employability measures within a broader anti-discrimination framework, calling for employer training, awareness-raising, and positive action to ensure equal access to both public and private sector employment.

3.2. Roma employment in NRSFs

A NRSF's "problem framing", whether it attributes unemployment primarily to structural barriers like discrimination or to perceived individual or community deficits, fundamentally shapes the logic, priorities, and nature of the interventions it proposes.

Across a vast majority of the NRSFs, the predominant explanation for Roma unemployment is structural, rooted in systemic disadvantages and societal barriers, rather than in the choices or culture of the Roma communities themselves. The identified key structural barriers include: prejudice and discrimination; educational and skills gaps; regional and geographic disparities; housing and living conditions; and digital exclusion. This constitutes a substantive change compared to the past framing of Roma unemployment as consequence of individual choices or failures (lack of motivation) with the need of "activation". Several NRSFs acknowledge this mistake. For example, the Czech NRSF explicitly states that the measures implemented so far [which were based on the logic of individual activation] had not led to a significant improvement in the situation and that the tendency to perceive the source of problems in Roma themselves, rather than in the approach of the majority or in systemic factors, reinforced negative phenomena. Or the Slovak NRSF recognises that the system of activation

⁶⁷ Roma Civil Monitor, 2025, Civil society monitoring report on the implementation of the national strategic framework for Roma equality, inclusion, and participation in Bulgaria, Publication Office of the European Union. Available at: <https://www.romacivilmonitoring.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/RCM2-2024-C1-Bulgaria-FINAL-ISBN.pdf>

⁶⁸ Roma Civil Monitor, unpublished, CSOs' assessment on the progress made in the implementation of National Roma Strategic Frameworks in 2023-2025.

[...] within active labour market measures is not effective [...] in terms of direct impact on reducing unemployment.

Residua of the interpretation through responsibility on the side of Roma, however, remain in several MSs' strategies. For example, the Slovenian NRSF argues that Roma's passivity and dependence on financial social assistance have become "a way of life". Similarly, Belgium or Bulgaria refer to a "lack of motivation" or "fatalism", but only as a secondary or induced factor resulting from structural barriers.

But recognition of a problem and its accurate explanation do not necessarily mean also that actions proposed in NRSFs also actually address the root causes. In the case of employment, the conceptual shift toward structural disadvantage by focusing on fighting antigypsyism/discrimination and tackling low educational attainments is only partial, and planned actions still rely heavily on supply-side interventions (training and activation), presenting a risk that the implementation may subtly revert to addressing individual deficits if not rigorously coupled with the promised, sustained fight against structural discrimination in the labour market (the demand side).

While most NRSFs adopt an integrated and holistic approach that addresses both individual needs and systemic issues (in line with the EU framework's encouragement for addressing antigypsyism, poverty, and sectoral gaps), the emphasis and tone in their proposed actions allow for a distinction in clustering.

Countries like Croatia, Czechia, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Sweden or Italy frame the problem explicitly as one rooted in societal, institutional, and historical discrimination (antigypsyism) and structural issues (segregation, low education). Their actions are heavily skewed toward addressing the "demand side" of the labour market and dismantling systemic obstacles. They often emphasise legal enforcement (antidiscrimination), and measures to hold institutions (schools, employers) accountable for discriminatory practices. On the other hand, MSs with the largest Roma populations and the most acute challenges, including Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Latvia or Slovakia, but also Latvia and Estonia with small Roma populations, significant explicit attention and resources to moving Roma (especially youth and women) from inactivity or poor education directly into the workforce. While they acknowledge discrimination, their major actionable measures often revolve around upskilling, training, guidance, and addressing internal barriers to entry (e.g., poor literacy or low motivation) – prioritising active labour market measures (ALMPs).

Critical analysis of NRSFs conducted by CSOs participating in the RCM's 2022 monitoring cycle focused on the quality of the strategic documents identified a number of omissions of problems in the field of employment or problems insufficiently addressed. In the field of employment, the most frequently omitted problems included:

- low-level digital competences among adults,
- poor access to or effectiveness of public employment services,
- discrimination by employers,
- diverse disincentives to employment, such as intendedness, or low income from work compared to social income.⁶⁹

A number of NRSFs recognise the diversity of needs among Roma, and women and youth are almost universally identified as facing compounded barriers to employment and social inclusion. However, the response ranges from general acknowledgment to highly specific, targeted measures. Many countries, such as Romania and Bulgaria, recognise in their analysis that women and youth have significantly lower chances of securing formal employment, but their proposed actions remain general. Other strategies propose more targeted actions. Greece includes a specific measure to "empower Roma women regarding gender-based discrimination", while Lithuania commits to supporting projects aimed specifically at the empowerment of Roma youth and women. Sweden offers one of the most concrete examples of targeted support. Its strategy proposes the development of a national programme for Roma entrepreneurship where "half of the funds are allocated for women-oriented initiatives," directly earmarking resources to address a specific intersectional gap.

⁶⁹ This section summarises the conclusions of the chapter "Employment" in: Roma Civil Monitor, unpublished, Civil society's assessment of the implementation of the National Roma Strategic Frameworks in the EU. Synthesis report.

3.3. Impact of NRSF implementation on employment and employability of Roma

The adoption of NRSFs formally signalled a political commitment to improving Roma access to the open labour market but in practice, in many MSs these strategies serve as rather weak coordination instruments and not as drivers of needed reform.

Political sensitivity surrounding Roma inclusion, combined with limited earmarked funding and fragmented institutional responsibilities across line ministries and local authorities, frequently constrained implementation. As a result, NRSFs often functioned as declaratory policy documents rather than as mechanisms capable of delivering sustained structural change. Moreover, in several Western and Northern MSs with relatively small Roma populations, objectives related to Roma employment remain modest in ambition and marginal in policy prioritisation.

Across most MSs, implementation of Roma employment measures relies heavily on European Cohesion Policy funding, in particular ESF+. Large-scale, nationally managed programmes dominated, especially in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, where Roma populations are larger. These interventions are typically embedded in mainstream labour market policies rather than designed as tailored pathways. Their effectiveness remained limited: weak links to real labour market demand were repeatedly observed, and beneficiaries frequently returned to inactivity or informal work after programme completion.

Roma employment measures are widely described as fragmented, underfunded, administratively complex and short-term. In some contexts, available funding is channelled into activities loosely connected to national action plans, diluting strategic coherence and limiting demonstrable impact. Policy approaches vary considerably. Several Central European countries prioritise social economy initiatives and municipally supported social enterprises, while others, particularly in Western Europe, focus more strongly on vocational training and skills development.

A persistent feature across countries with larger Roma populations is the overreliance on public works schemes and limited engagement with private employers. In many Member States, Roma employment support remains closely tied to low-paid, low-skilled public employment, offering little prospect of progression into the open labour market. These schemes tend to stabilise long-term labour market marginality rather than facilitate transitions to sustainable employment. A more recent trend, observed primarily in parts of Central and Eastern Europe, involves the creation of jobs “within communities for communities”, typically organised by local authorities and targeted exclusively at Roma. While these roles occasionally met short-term local needs, they offered no career progression, limited interaction with the wider labour market, and did little to build transferable skills or social capital beyond Roma communities. Moreover, sometimes dependence of venerable groups of population, including Roma, on these jobs is misused by local politicians.

Measures explicitly aimed at strengthening Roma participation in the regular labour market lag significantly behind and are clearly articulated only in countries with more developed equality and anti-discrimination frameworks. Scaling up such interventions and embedding Roma employment support into mainstream labour market policies remains an unresolved challenge.

Across all regions, the absence of reliable, disaggregated data on Roma employment constitute a major structural constraint. Most public employment systems operated under an “ethnically blind” approach, either avoiding data collection altogether or applying methodologies that rendered the data unusable for policy evaluation. Consequently, many national strategies articulated ambitious employment targets without clear baselines, indicators or evaluation mechanisms. Where targets are specified, they are frequently either insufficiently ambitious or unrealistically high.

Discrimination, even if widely acknowledged as a central driver of low Roma labour market participation, is rarely systematically addressed in reality. Only a small number of MSs, primarily in Northern and Western Europe, implemented dedicated measures targeting labour market discrimination, while in most contexts such interventions are explicitly absent.

4. INSPIRING PRACTICES

The concepts of “best practices” and “promising practices” have become entrenched in European Union policy discourse as tools for knowledge transfer, policy learning and soft coordination across MSs, mainly in areas where the EU has limited formal competence, including employment, and Roma equality. “Best practices” have been presented as exemplary policy measures, programmes or institutional arrangements that had demonstrated effectiveness in addressing a defined policy challenge in a specific national or local context. Over time, the term attracted growing criticism for its implicit claim of optimality and transferability. This led to the gradual introduction of alternative formulations, most notably “promising practices”, or “inspiring practices”. These concepts reflect a more cautious and reflexive approach, acknowledging that many interventions were still evolving, context-dependent, or insufficiently evaluated to justify being labelled as “best”.

In this section, we provide a few examples we consider inspiring for horizontal policy learning among MSs, and local authorities; additionally, we believe that dissemination of information on these initiatives has an important communicative function as they can deconstruct anti-Roma stereotypes, motivate stakeholders to engage and legitimise investments into Roma equality in the field of employment. At the same time, we realise that success of interventions is heavily context-dependent and it is not possible to simply transfer a practice from one setting to another with the same effect (see below the case of unsuccessful transfer of the Spanish Acceder programme to Italy). Finally, we consider important to stress that any successful intervention may have its weaknesses, and policies perceived in general critically may include elements that are useful or have positive impact on some participants.

4.1. Health mediation as a pathway to employment for Roma women (RO)

Introduction

Romania hosts the largest Roma population in the European Union in absolute numbers. According to the 2021 Population and Housing Census, 569,477 people identified as Roma, representing approximately 3.4 % of those declaring ethnicity.⁷⁰ Under-declaration remains a recognised issue due to stigma and discrimination.

Roma face persistent structural disadvantages in education, housing, health and employment. They live often concentrated in rural and semi-rural settlements characterised by weak infrastructure and limited labour force demand. Labour market participation among Roma remains significantly below national averages. The 2021 FRA Roma Survey indicates that in 2021 the employment rate of Roma aged 20-64 was approximately 41%, compared with 71% in the general population. The gap is particularly pronounced for Roma women. Within the Roma community, the survey found that only 28% of Roma women were in paid work, compared to 58% of Roma men.⁷¹ Barriers include low educational attainment, high levels of informal work, geographic isolation, administrative obstacles and discrimination.

Public Employment Services (PES), coordinated by the National Employment Agency, provide activation, counselling and vocational training measures within the mainstream employment policy framework. While eligibility criteria are formally regulated by law, the practical effectiveness of these services for highly marginalised Roma women is limited. Standard activation instruments tend to function more effectively for individuals who possess basic formal education, documented employment histories and the ability to navigate administrative procedures. In practice, discrimination, low levels of formal education, limited digital and bureaucratic literacy, and weak institutional trust significantly reduce the accessibility and impact of mainstream employment measures for Roma women in segregated rural communities. Romania has also implemented Roma-targeted measures within national Roma inclusion strategies and through European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) funded programmes aimed at improving access to employment and skills development. However, according to the Roma Civil Monitor report 2025 report many of these interventions remain project-

⁷⁰ Data available at: <https://www.recensamantromania.ro/rezultate-rpl-2021/rezultate-definitive/>, point 2.1.

⁷¹ Available at: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2022-roma-survey-2021-main-results2_en.pdf

based and limited in duration, which constrains their capacity to generate stable and long-term labour market integration for Roma women in structurally disadvantaged areas.⁷²

Within this context, the Health Mediation Programme represents a policy innovation rather than merely a publicly funded occupation. Its added value lies in transforming a civil society pilot initiative into a formally recognised, professionalised and system-integrated function within the national community healthcare framework. By embedding culturally competent mediation into mainstream public health structures, the programme moved beyond temporary project-based inclusion measures and established a legally regulated and institutionally anchored employment pathway, primarily accessible to Roma women with limited formal education in vulnerable communities.

Background information

The programme originated in 1993 in response to interethnic tensions and severe healthcare exclusion affecting the Roma communities; community assessments revealed low vaccination coverage, limited access to primary care and profound mistrust between Roma residents and medical staff. A CSO, Romani CRISS, developed the initial model by training a Roma woman from the community to act as a mediator between families and healthcare providers. Early results showed improved vaccination uptake and strengthened communication.

The institutionalisation and national scaling of health mediation took place within the broader context of Romania's preparation of its first Roma inclusion strategy 1998-2000. This period coincided with Romania's EU pre-accession process, during which minority protection, anti-discrimination measures and Roma inclusion became increasingly salient in both domestic reform agendas and international monitoring frameworks. Romani CRISS maintained sustained dialogue with experts from the Ministry of Health, presenting evidence from the pilot health mediation programme and documenting measurable improvements in vaccination coverage and access to primary care. Based on these reports, and within the framework of formal cooperation protocols signed between Romani CRISS and the Ministry of Health, supported by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues, the Health chapter of the Strategy's Action Plan formally identified the training and employment of health mediators as a priority measure. This strategic alignment between civil society advocacy, governmental reform commitments and international policy pressure created a favourable institutional window for embedding health mediation within national public policy.⁷³

Based on an ongoing advocacy campaign conducted by Romani CRISS, in the beginning of 2001 the occupation 'health mediator' was included in the Romanian Classification of Occupations (COR 532901).

In 2002, Order No 619/2002 of the Ministry of Health regulated the organisation and financing of the activity, transforming the initiative into a public policy instrument. Between 2002 and 2007, based on the said order, the Roma civil society, in partnership with the Ministry of Health, organised basic training courses for Roma women in the profession of health mediator, which were subsequently taken over by the community healthcare system managed by the Ministry of Health through the county public health directorates, which coordinate the activity of health mediators.⁷⁴

By 2007, approximately 788 mediators were active nationwide, paid from the budget of the Ministry of Health. Following the decentralisation of certain powers from the Ministry of Health to local public authorities, responsibility was transferred to municipalities. Although financing mechanisms formally relied on state transfers, according to the new legislation, many municipalities lacked the administrative capacity and financial predictability required to sustain the programme. Limited local budgetary resources, uncertainty regarding

⁷² Available at: <https://www.romacivilmonitoring.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/RCM2-2024-C1-Romania-FINAL-ISBN.pdf>

⁷³ Rădulescu, D. (2014) *Between Policy Design and Necessity: Evaluating the Impact of Public Policies for Roma in the Field of Health*. Bucharest: SNSPA.

⁷⁴ Rădulescu, D. (2012). 'The Health Mediation Programme between Necessity and Innovation', *Perspective Politice*.

salary continuity and insufficient operational guidance during the transition period led to uneven implementation and a reduction in the number of active mediators.⁷⁵

Currently, according to the Ministry of Health database, 468 health mediators are active under Government Decision No 324/2019, which regulates community healthcare services. Although this figure remains below the 2007 peak, the programme is entering a new stage that reflects a broader trajectory of institutional reform rather than simple numerical recovery. In a context marked by renewed investment in integrated rural services, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Labour are jointly implementing a large-scale intervention financed through the Programme for Social Inclusion and Dignity (POIDS), covering approximately 2,000 rural localities. According to a report of the National Agency for Roma on the implementation of the National Strategy for Roma Inclusion, more than 500 of these localities will benefit from health mediation activities for a period of three years under the project. Importantly, the reform design does not end with temporary EU financing: the mediators recruited through the programme are intended to be absorbed by local public authorities and subsequently financed from the national budget.⁷⁶

This marks a significant shift in the programme's evolution. From a civil society pilot in the 1990s, to national recognition in the early 2000s, followed by contraction during decentralisation, health mediation is now positioned within a broader framework of integrated community reform. The current expansion suggests a deliberate effort to move beyond fragmented, project-based inclusion and towards embedding mediation as a permanent feature of rural community services. In this sense, the programme's trajectory illustrates a gradual transition from innovation to institutional consolidation.

Case description

Health mediators are employed within the framework of community healthcare services regulated by Government Decision No 324/2019⁷⁷. At local level, municipal authorities recruit and appoint health mediators in accordance with the procedures established under this Decision and applicable labour legislation. Following completion of the qualification course, candidates participate in a formal recruitment competition organised by the local authority in partnership with the County Public Health Directorate. The competition is conducted in line with the Labour Code and public sector employment regulations, ensuring transparency and equal access to public positions.

The selection of candidates for the qualification course is organised locally by the municipal authority in partnership with Roma community leaders and with the active participation of the community itself. The process involves consultation with community representatives to ensure transparency and local endorsement. Candidates must be accepted and trusted by the community, recognised for appropriate behavioural standards and possess the minimum level of formal education required to enrol in the qualification programme. These criteria ensure not only compliance with professional training requirements but also social legitimacy and credibility within the community they will serve.

Qualification courses are delivered by accredited vocational training providers and are recognised by the National Authority for Qualifications. Among these providers is Sastipen – the Roma Centre for Health Policies, an accredited institution with longstanding experience in training health mediators. The curriculum follows nationally approved occupational standards and includes mediation skills, public health education, administrative procedures and reporting requirements.

Once employed, health mediators are integrated into multidisciplinary community healthcare teams, typically composed of community nurses, family doctors and social workers. While employment contracts are concluded by local authorities, methodological coordination is carried out in partnership with the County Public Health Directorate, which provides professional guidance and technical supervision.

Salaries are financed from funds allocated by the Ministry of Health from the national budget for community healthcare services. Health mediators benefit from all rights applicable to public sector employees, including salary increases based on professional experience, years of service and other legal provisions. Although

⁷⁵ Rădulescu 2014.

⁷⁶ Report of the Prime Minister's Office on the status of implementation of the national strategy for Roma inclusion. Available at: <https://cancelarie.gov.ro/strategia-nationala-de-incluziune-a-romilor/>

⁷⁷ Available at: https://ms.ro/media/documents/HOTARARE_Nr._324_2019_forma_la_data_de_20.11.2023.pdf

remuneration remains modest compared with national averages, in many rural areas it represents stable formal employment in contexts characterised by limited private-sector opportunities and high informality.

The occupation is not legally restricted to Roma women; however, recruitment criteria emphasising community trust and cultural competence have resulted in the predominance of Roma women in these positions. In practice, the programme functions as a gender-sensitive and community-embedded pathway to stable public-sector employment in vulnerable localities. For many Roma women, the motivation to become health mediators combines the prospect of stable income and social security with the opportunity to contribute directly to the well-being of their community, gain professional recognition and strengthen their role and voice within both Roma and majority institutions.

Results and impact

The Health Mediation Programme has generated both direct employment outcomes and broader social inclusion effects. For many Roma women, the position of health mediator represented their first formal employment contract, providing stable income, social insurance coverage and pension contributions. In rural localities characterised by high informality and limited private-sector opportunities, the programme has created structured public-sector employment accessible to women with lower secondary education.

Beyond individual employment gains, the programme has contributed to strengthening institutional trust and improving access to primary healthcare services in Roma communities. Evaluations and practice-based analyses indicate measurable improvements in vaccination coverage, maternal health monitoring and communication between Roma patients and medical staff⁷⁸. By embedding culturally competent mediation within community healthcare teams, the programme has supported preventive health interventions while simultaneously enhancing the economic participation of Roma women.

At a systemic level, the initiative demonstrates how sectoral public policies can function as labour market inclusion instruments when professionalisation, legal recognition and institutional integration are combined. The programme has thus contributed not only to improving service delivery outcomes but also to creating sustainable pathways into formal employment for a structurally disadvantaged group.

Analysis

The Health Mediation Programme represents a policy innovation that combines professional recognition, community legitimacy and integration within the mainstream public health system. Its key strength lies in embedding health mediators within existing community healthcare structures rather than creating separate or temporary employment schemes exclusively for Roma. Integration within mainstream public services avoided parallel employment schemes that often isolate beneficiaries in short-term, project-based positions disconnected from institutional career frameworks. Instead, mediators are employed under standard public sector regulations, integrated into multidisciplinary teams and subject to the same legal and professional standards as other community healthcare staff. This institutional embedding enhances both sustainability and professional legitimacy.

The programme also demonstrates the value of community-based recruitment and culturally competent service delivery. By selecting candidates trusted within Roma communities and professionalizing their role through accredited training, the initiative has strengthened both service effectiveness and labour market inclusion for Roma women.

Challenges remain. Decentralization produced uneven territorial coverage, and salary levels vary across municipalities. Career progression pathways are limited. Nonetheless, the programme is widely regarded by public authorities and civil society as a good practice in Roma inclusion. The experience illustrates how sectoral reform can generate inclusive employment outcomes when institutional stability and community participation are combined.

⁷⁸ Rădulescu 2014.

Lessons learned and recommendations

The main lesson is that durable inclusion requires institutional anchoring. Legal recognition, stable financing and integration within mainstream systems are critical. Community-based recruitment strengthens legitimacy and service impact.

Local authorities should ensure predictable financing and adequate remuneration, while strengthening supervision and professional support.

National authorities should harmonize employment conditions, develop career pathways and integrate mediation explicitly within labour market inclusion strategies.

At EU level, cohesion policy instruments, particularly ESF+, should continue supporting integrated community services that combine employment creation with access to essential services.

Civil society should maintain advocacy and monitoring roles, while supporting professional networks among mediators.

The Health Mediation Programme illustrates that sustainable Roma employment inclusion is most effective when institutional stability, community legitimacy and public service integration are combined.

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4.2. Heritage conservation in municipalities with marginalised Roma communities (SK)

Introduction

Slovakia is home to one of the largest Roma populations in the EU, estimated at between 400,000 and 500,000 individuals, or approximately 7-8 % of the total population. The majority of the country's Roma population lives in the eastern and central regions of the country, often in segregated settlements with limited access to formal employment, public services, and is often educated in segregated schools providing low-quality instruction.

Labour market exclusion constitutes one of the most acute dimensions of Roma disadvantage in Slovakia. According to data from the special survey "EU statistics on income and living conditions survey" conducted in marginalised Roma communities (EU SILC_MRK) in 2020, the employment rate among marginalised Roma stands at only 33%, compared with approximately 53% for men and 50% for women in the general population.⁷⁹ Other estimates are even lower, with some sources recording employment rates of 27 % for Roma

⁷⁹ Markovič, F. and Plachá, L. (2022). *Príjmy a životné podmienky v marginalizovaných rómskych komunitách: Vybrané ukazovatele zo zisťovania EU SILC_MRK 2020 [Income and Living Conditions in Marginalised Roma Communities:*

men and 17% for Roma women.⁸⁰ Roma labour market participation is characterised by discontinuity, seasonal contracts, and a high incidence of informal or undeclared work that provides neither social insurance coverage nor a foundation for stable income.

Discrimination, low educational attainment and regional shortage of job opportunities are primary structural drivers of labour market exclusion. Only 51% of Roma pupils continue into upper secondary education after completing compulsory schooling, and the employment rate for individuals of working age who hold only a basic or lower secondary qualification (ISCED 0–2) reaches a mere 19%.⁸¹ Ethnic discrimination compounds this disadvantage: 37% of Roma women and 28% of Roma men reported encountering discrimination on grounds of ethnicity when seeking employment.⁸² Indebtedness, accumulated during periods of unemployment primarily through health insurance arrears and recourse to non-bank lenders, further discourages formal employment, as wage garnishments from court orders substantially reduce the net income available to workers.

Active labour market policies (ALMPs) have consistently underperformed in addressing the employment challenges of Roma communities. The dominant instrument, so-called activation works, which subsidise short-term community service employment, has been shown by multiple evaluations to have no positive impact on subsequent open-market employment, primarily because the activities involved do not generate skills with market value.⁸³

Background information

The origins of the “People and Castles” programme lie in a civil society initiative for heritage conservation that predates any involvement of public employment policy by nearly a decade. The “Save the Castles” (*Zachráňme hrady*) network was founded in 2002 as an association of civic organisations committed to the conservation of Slovakia’s medieval castle ruins, many of which had fallen into severe disrepair following the withdrawal of state funding for monument conservation after 1989.⁸⁴ By organising voluntary brigades, developing restoration techniques, and establishing sustained relationships with regional heritage authorities, these organisations accumulated two decades of practical expertise in historic masonry and conservation methodology.

Selected Indicators from the EU SILC_MRK 2020 Survey. Bratislava: Úrad vlády SR. Available at: https://www.romovia.vlada.gov.sk/site/assets/files/1561/analyticka_sprava_eu_silc_mrk_2020_elektronicka_final.pdf

⁸⁰ Hidas, S., Lacérsóvá, Z. and Machlica, G. (2018). *Inklúzia Rómov je celospoločenskou výzvou [Roma inclusion is a challenge for society as a whole]*. Bratislava: Inštitút finančnej politiky. Available at: <https://www.mfsr.sk/sk/financie/institut-financnej-politiky/publikacie-ifp/komentare/18-inkluzia-romov-je-celospolocenskou-vyzvou-august-2018.html>

⁸¹ Hellebrandt, T. et al. (2020). *Revízia výdavkov na skupiny ohrozené chudobou alebo sociálnym vylúčením [Expenditure Review on Groups at Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion]*. Bratislava: Útvár hodnoty za peniaze / Inštitút finančnej politiky. Available at: <https://www.minedu.sk/data/att/28f/15944.3bab36.pdf>

⁸² Markovič & Plachá 2022.

⁸³ Hidas, S. et al. (2016). *Veľá práca na úradoch práce: Efektivita a účinnosť služieb zamestnanosti [Heavy Workload at Labour Offices: Efficiency and Effectiveness of Employment Services]*. Bratislava: Inštitút finančnej politiky. Available at: https://www.mfsr.sk/files/sk/financie/hodnota-za-peniaze/revizia-vydavkov/socialne-politiky/Sluzby_zamestnanosti_final_20161010.pdf

Kureková, L., Salner, A. and Farenzenová, A. (2013). *Implementation of Activation Works in Slovakia*. Bratislava: SGI. Available at: https://stary-web.governance.sk/assets/files/publikacie/ACTIVATION_WORKS_REPORT_SGI.pdf

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⁸⁴ Kováčová, L. (2025). *Kvalitatívna analýza efektívnosti opatrení podporujúcich zamestnateľnosť osôb z MRK v rámci hodnotenia národného projektu Ľudia a hrady (2022–2023) [Qualitative Analysis of the Effectiveness of Measures Supporting the Employability of Persons from Marginalised Roma Communities within the Evaluation of the National Project People and Castles (2022–2023)]*. Bratislava: Úrad splnomocnenca vlády SR pre rómske komunity. Available at: https://www.romovia.vlada.gov.sk/site/assets/files/4976/analyza_np_ludia_a_hrady_web-1.pdf

The convergence of civil society heritage activity with public employment policy began in 2011, when a pilot project co-ordinated by the Save the Castles network and supported by the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Labour employed 50 unemployed individuals at the castles of Uhrovec and Šariš. The pilot demonstrated that heritage conservation sites could function as productive workplaces for low-skilled unemployed people and that the activities involved genuine skills development rather than mere make-work. A series of national projects followed: in 2012-2013, 772 unemployed persons participated; approximately 453 in 2014; approximately 554 in 2015; and 1,231 in 2016-2017. These earlier iterations, implemented under the ESF operational programmes, focused on the unemployed generally, without an explicit criterion targeting Roma communities.

The 2022-2023 National Project People and Castles represented a significant departure from its predecessors. For the first time, social inclusion of Roma, specifically individuals residing in marginalised Roma communities, was established as an explicit aim rather than an incidental outcome. The project was implemented by the Ministry of Culture and funded under Priority Axis 5 ('Integration of Marginalised Roma Communities') of the ESF-funded Operational Programme Human Resources with a budget of EUR 9 millions.⁸⁵ A subsequent extension of 18 months (2024-2025) was approved under the auspices of the Central Labour Office under another national project formally aimed at development of social economy.⁸⁶

Eligible implementing organisations (referred to as 'recipients') were municipalities, civic associations, foundations, and other legal entities that held ownership or a long-term lease of a listed cultural monument located within, or in proximity to, localities recorded in the Atlas of Roma Communities. The requirement that at least 60% of employed workers be drawn from Roma communities established an explicit integration mandate whilst preserving operational flexibility for recipients.

Case description

The 2022-2023 iteration of National Project People and Castles engaged 25 recipients, 15 municipalities and ten non-governmental organisations, located across the Banská Bystrica, Prešov, and Košice regions, the three Slovak regions with the highest concentration of marginalised Roma communities and above-average unemployment rates. Across these sites, 465 individuals were employed under formal employment contracts; 330 of these, representing 71% of the total workforce, were identified as members of Roma communities, significantly exceeding the statutory 60% threshold. A total of 578 persons received assistive services (see below for more details) throughout the project lifecycle. Of those employed from Roma communities, 344 held at most a lower secondary qualification (ISCED 0-2), and 169 had been registered as long-term unemployed prior to their engagement.⁸⁷

The workforce was structured across four employment categories reflecting skill levels and supervisory responsibilities: 210 independent workers, who performed skilled tasks; 172 auxiliary workers performing supporting and preparatory tasks; 43 foremen, who supervised and trained workers and held at minimum a vocational qualification or a certified requalification; and 29 project co-ordinators responsible for administrative and social support functions. Because of their level of education and skills, most Roma were present in lower positions, auxiliary and independent workers. Several recipients noted that auxiliary workers had progressed to independent worker status as their skills developed; and some workers progressed to coordinators (the position of foremen required formal education). At the same time, some Roma workers were

⁸⁵ Ministry of Culture. (2024). *Monitorovacia správa projektu – Záverečná. Zvýšenie zamestnanosti a zamestnateľnosti ľudí žijúcich v lokalitách s prítomnosťou MRK realizáciou obnovy kultúrneho dedičstva [Final Project Monitoring Report. Increasing Employment and Employability of People Living in Localities with the Presence of Marginalised Roma Communities through the Restoration of Cultural Heritage]*. ITMS2014+ kód: 312051CGX9.

⁸⁶ Central Labour Office. *Národný projekt Ľudia a hrady – krok k sociálnej ekonomike [National Project People and Castles – A Step Towards the Social Economy]*. Available at: https://www.upsvr.gov.sk/buxus/docs/download/Opis_NP_Ludia_a_hrady_-_krok_k_socialnej_ekonomike.pdf

See also: Moštenická, Z. et al. (2025). *Analýza monitorovacích výstupov z pozície partnera projektu v národnom projekte „Ľudia a hrady – krok k sociálnej ekonomike“ (2024 – 2025) [Analysis of Monitoring Outputs from the Position of a Project Partner in the National Project “People and Castles – A Step Towards the Social Economy” (2024–2025)]*. Bratislava: Úrad splnomocnenca vlády SR pre rómske komunity. Available at: https://romovia.vlada.gov.sk/site/assets/files/5014/np_ludia_a_hrady_analyza_final.pdf?csrc=16915229672234404236

⁸⁷ Kováčová 2025.

involved in working with tourists as guides. The gender distribution was highly skewed: 92% of participants were male and 8% female. Women were employed principally in assistant positions.⁸⁸

The work activities varied by site and monument type but generally encompassed historic masonry and lime-mortar pointing, erection and use of scaffolding, carpentry and joinery, archaeological excavation under professional supervision, vegetation management, path and access route construction, and visitor information and tourism support. A defining characteristic of the programme was its engagement with a speciality that does not exist as a formally taught vocation in Slovakia: the restoration of historic masonry using traditional stone-laying techniques and original materials. As one foreman noted, this is a craft that “can only be learnt directly at a castle from a skilled stonemason” and cannot be acquired through any standard educational pathway.⁸⁹

Recruitment was conducted through a combination of direct personal outreach by municipalities to individuals known to them from previous projects or activation works, referrals from labour offices, peer recommendations among community members, and collaboration with field social workers. In a number of localities, recipients built on established working relationships from the earlier grant programme “Let Us Restore Our Home” (*Obnovme si svoj dom*) of the Ministry of Culture, enabling continuity of engagement with vetted and experienced workers.

Skill transfer was delivered primarily through a peer-to-peer model embedded in the team structure: mixed groups of experienced independent workers and less-experienced auxiliary workers were organised so that practical skills could be acquired through daily observation and guided practice under foreman supervision. In at least one case, recipients supplemented on-site learning with online instructional videos covering specific masonry techniques, used during winter months when outdoor activity at certain sites was restricted by weather conditions. This individualised, non-standardised mode of instruction was seen as essential given the bespoke, non-normalised nature of heritage masonry, where no two stones are identical and technique must be adapted to each situation.⁹⁰

Beyond employment itself, recipients provided a range of social support services, either directly through municipal staff or through collaboration with labour offices, field social workers, and community centres. These included assistance in establishing repayment schedules or initiating personal insolvency proceedings for workers with debt enforcement orders, regularisation of identity documents, registration of paternity to enable access to child tax credits, and informal provision of transport to remote sites from discretionary funds where no formal commuting allowance was available. Recipients reported that in some localities, resolving debt enforcement orders (primarily arising from health insurance arrears accumulated during periods of unemployment) was a precondition for workers’ willingness to accept formal employment at all, as substantial wage deductions from garnishment orders significantly reduced net take-home pay.⁹¹

Results and impact

The quantitative results of the project, as documented in the official monitoring report, substantially exceeded planned targets across key indicators.⁹² The number of persons receiving assistive services (578 versus a target of 390; achievement rate 148%) was particularly notable. The proportion of Roma among all employed workers reached 71%, compared with the required minimum of 60%. Persons with at most a lower secondary qualification amounted to 344, against a target of 120 (achievement rate 287%). Persons who had been long-term unemployed prior to participation numbered 169.

In qualitative terms, the most significant outcome reported by both employers and participants was the acquisition of specific skills. Recipients highlighted in particular the mastery of historic masonry and lime-based

⁸⁸ Idem.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

pointing, which, given the absence of any formal qualification pathway for this specialisation in Slovakia, represents a skill that is simultaneously rare and potentially transferable to commercial construction.⁹³

Social outcomes were reported across multiple dimensions. In three localities, recipients documented cases where sustained project participation had enabled workers to repair or construct permanent housing, or to purchase land, reflecting the impact of stable, multi-month income on asset accumulation among households that had previously survived primarily on social benefits.⁹⁴ Access to formal employment also led to workers acquiring familiarity with employment law, including entitlements to paid leave and sick pay, rights that many had not previously exercised. Several recipients reported an increase in media visibility and community recognition for participating workers, whose contributions to recognisable heritage sites were featured in local and national press and social media, creating a dignity dimension to the work that contrasted sharply with the stigma commonly associated with activation works.

At the level of the cultural heritage estate, participating organisations documented measurable progress on the conservation of monuments that had in many cases been deteriorating for decades without intervention. Several sites used restored heritage assets as a basis for developing new cultural events, establishing visitor museums, or expanding tourist offer, generating indirect economic benefits for their localities.

Analysis

Several features of the programme design need to be stressed as elements of promising practice. First, the peer-to-peer learning structure embedded in the mixed-skill team model ensures that skills transfer occurs as an organic feature of daily work rather than as an add-on training component. Second, the progression pathway from auxiliary to independent worker status provides both a motivational incentive and a formal marker of skill development. Third, the holistic support model (addressing debt, documentation, and commuting as preconditions for stable participation) reflects an understanding of the multiple and mutually reinforcing barriers that prevent Roma individuals from sustaining formal employment, barriers that standard employment placement services are not designed to address.

The cultural heritage dimension of the programme carries significance that extends beyond its job inclusion dimension. Unlike most Roma employment initiatives, which struggle to attract political attention, the People and Castles programme has proven palatable to Slovak politicians precisely because its primary visible output is the restoration of national monuments, objects of collective pride with which the majority population readily identifies. This political palatability has sustained the programme across successive government cycles. Equally significant is the impact of this heritage framing on participants themselves. Workers who have spent months labouring on a castle commonly develop a strong sense of personal connection to the site. At several sites they have served as tourist guides, introducing visiting tourists to monuments they helped restore and which they now regard, with evident pride, as “their castles”.⁹⁵ This affective ownership represents a form of social recognition and community belonging that conventional employment schemes rarely generate.

At the same time, the programme faces some fundamental challenges. Fundamentally, it replicates the logic of the activation works it was designed to supersede: it provides time-limited subsidised employment, it is dependent on repeated public funding cycles, and it does not generate a lasting employment relationship between participants and any employer operating on the open market. This constrains its impact. Contrary to the expectations, the acquisition of rare and genuinely valued skills has not translated into significant transitions to the open labour market. This outcome reflects two compounding barriers. First, the natural employers for workers trained in historic masonry (municipalities, civic associations, and other owners of listed monuments) typically lack the financial resources to sustain the restoration work that would make use of this workforce outside the framework of a publicly funded project. In other words, the demand for the specific skills generated by the programme is itself almost entirely dependent on the same public funding streams that finance the programme. And indeed, in later editions of the programme, participants from previous iterations are highly demanded. Second, participants who complete the project exit it without any officially recognised

⁹³ Ministry of Culture 2024.

⁹⁴ Kováčová 2025.

⁹⁵ Interview with an expert that wished remain anonymous, 25 February 2026.

qualification, which means that the competencies they have developed, however substantial in practice, remain invisible to employers in adjacent sectors such as construction or general restoration work.

The most significant operational weakness is temporal discontinuity: the gap between successive project iterations, sometimes extending to many months, results in income loss, re-accumulation of debt, and the erosion of skills for workers who cannot find equivalent employment on the open market. This cyclical pattern of engagement and withdrawal from formal employment may, paradoxically, reinforce the patterns of economic instability and indebtedness that the programme seeks to address. As one recipient observed, workers who had settled their debts and improved their living conditions during project participation were at risk of renewed enforcement orders within months of the project ending, should no continuation follow.⁹⁶

Lessons learned and recommendations

The People and Castles programme offers a number of transferable lessons for the design of labour market integration measures targeting multiply disadvantaged groups.

At the level of programme design, the most important lesson is that temporal continuity is a prerequisite for durable impact. Short-term projects cannot generate the sustained change in employment behaviour, skill acquisition, and social circumstance that their objectives imply. Eliminating gaps between successive project iterations, ideally through the development of a permanent, institutionalised framework rather than a sequence of ESF-funded projects with uncertain succession, is the single recommendation most consistently advanced by recipients and confirmed by the evaluation evidence.⁹⁷

Acquired skills would merit formal recognition equivalent to a vocational certificate. In Slovakia, the 2024 amendment to the Adult Education Act (Act No 292/2022) now provides the legal basis for educational institutions to issue micro-credentials, an instrument that did not exist during the 2022-2023 project cycle. Developing a micro-credential in historic masonry conservation, in partnership with a secondary vocational school with a relevant specialisation, would require relatively modest investment but would fundamentally alter the programme's labour market impact: participants would exit with a portable, officially recognised qualification usable in heritage conservation, construction, and restoration work beyond the project itself.

The social support model encompassing debt resolution, documentation, and commuting assistance should be formalised as a standard budget component rather than depending on the discretionary initiative of individual recipients. Recipients with smaller administrative teams (in particular, civic associations) lack the capacity to deliver these services systematically. A dedicated social co-ordination position within project budgets, possibly shared across groups of geographically proximate recipients, would address this gap.

For Roma women specifically, programme design should incorporate explicit incentives for the development of roles in tourism, visitor information, museum management, and cultural animation, functions that a number of recipients have developed organically and that represent an underexploited dimension of heritage site development. Financial incentives for recipients who demonstrate gender-inclusive recruitment strategies, analogous to the marginalised Roma communities' participation threshold, would provide a structural impetus for change.

At the European level, the programme represents a replicable model for Member States with both a significant Roma population and an under-resourced heritage conservation sector. The dual benefit structure (labour inclusion plus public cultural good) provides a policy rationale that is more politically sustainable than Roma-targeted employment subsidies alone and may command broader cross-party support.

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⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Kováčová 2025.

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4.3. From school to shop floor: Corporation–NGO partnership for Roma youth employment (SK)

Introduction

The description of the situation of the Roma population and their employment challenges are described in the previous case study. The situation is particularly severe in the case of young Roma. According to data from the special survey “EU statistics on income and living conditions survey” conducted in marginalised Roma communities (EU SILC_MRK) in 2020, as much as 67% of Roma youth from marginalised communities, and 47% of Roma youth living in the mainstream society aged 16-24 are not in employment, education or training

(NEETs), contrasting with 12% rate in the general population. There is a significant gender gap: 73% among marginalised and 50% among integrated Roma women, against 60 and 45% among men.⁹⁸

Among the main reasons are early school leaving and consequent low educational attainment. While only 10% of the overall adult population left school prematurely, the rate among marginalised Roma adults is 83%. For Roma living in an integrated setting, the figure is lower at 64%, indicating a correlation between living conditions and educational outcomes. Among the younger generation (18-24 years), the share of early school leavers is 72% for marginalised Roma and 52% for integrated Roma, whereas it remains at 10% for the general population.⁹⁹

The length of compulsory schooling plays a crucial role, as it ends in the grade when the student turns 16. Young Roma whose formal education ends with the completion of compulsory schooling frequently face a combination of insufficient qualifications to compete on the open labour market, an absence of work experience, and the additional disadvantage of ethnic discrimination from employers. Multiple discrimination, the compounding effect of ethnicity and age, renders this group particularly difficult to reach through conventional active labour market policies, which, moreover, in Slovakia do not offer any measures specifically tailored to this target group.

The disconnect between the formal education system and the realities of Roma children's starting conditions (inadequate home learning environments, financial pressure on families, geographic isolation, and school segregation) means that without targeted intervention, the educational system reproduces labour market exclusion rather than alleviating it.

Slovakia's dual vocational education system, governed by Act No 61/2015 on Vocational Education and Training, offers a legally regulated pathway that alternates in-class study at a secondary vocational school (*Stredné odborné školy*, henceforth SOŠ) with supervised practical training directly at an employer's premises.¹⁰⁰ Three-year programmes leading to a journeyman's certificate (*vyučný list*) represent a potentially accessible pathway for young Roma, as they place considerably less demand on academic preparation than four-years upper secondary study programme completed with final examination (*maturita*). However, the capacity of mainstream dual vocational programmes to accommodate young people from highly disadvantaged backgrounds is limited without sustained external support. It is this gap that the partnership between Tesco Stores SR and the civil society organisation People in Peril Slovakia (*Človek v ohrození*; henceforth ČvO) has sought to address.

Background information

ČvO is one of the largest civil society organisations operating in Slovakia in the field of social inclusion, combining emergency humanitarian response with long-term community development programmes. Its social integration activities include a network of community centres and youth clubs operating in marginalised Roma localities across six of Slovakia's eight regions (Prešov, Košice, Banská Bystrica, Bratislava, Trnava, and Žilina self-governing regions), providing career counselling, mentoring, supplementary schooling, and supported employment services to children and young adults from Roma communities.

The partnership with Tesco Stores SR, the Slovak subsidiary of the British multinational retailer, was initiated in 2021 as part of ČvO's broader strategy of engaging the private sector in co-designed integration programmes. ČvO had developed its inclusive dual vocational education methodology in an earlier collaboration with other retail company, DM Drogerie Markt, which began in 2018 and demonstrated that large retail employers with a dense network of outlets could function as anchor institutions for Roma youth integration,

⁹⁸ Markovič, F. & Plachá, L. (2022). *Príjmy a životné podmienky v marginalizovaných rómskych komunitách: Vybrané ukazovatele zo zisťovania EU SILC_MRK 2020 [Income and Living Conditions in Marginalized Roma Communities: Selected Indicators from the Survey EU SILC_MRK 2020]*. Bratislava: Úrad splnomocnenca vlády SR pre rómske komunity, p. 39. Available at: https://www.romovia.vlada.gov.sk/site/assets/files/1563/analyticka_sprava_eu_silc_mrk_2020_elektronicka_final.pdf?csrt=8308248272331438178.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Act No. 61/2015 Coll. on Vocational Education and Training and on Amendments to Certain Acts (Act on Vocational Education and Training).

providing both the practical training placements and a realistic prospect of subsequent employment.¹⁰¹ The approach was subsequently adapted for Tesco, one of the three largest store network in Slovakia, and implemented in more than 20 outlets at which the collaboration is active.

In 2023, the partnership was formalised into initially two related but distinct instruments. The first was the announcement by Tesco Stores SR to the country's equality body, the Slovak National Centre for Human Rights (*Slovenské národné stredisko pre ľudské práva*) of a so-called "Temporary Equalisation Measure" (*dočasné vyrovnávacie opatrenie*, henceforth DVO), entitled 'Development Programme for Low-Qualified Youth from Roma Communities in Tesco Stores SR, in Cooperation with *Človek v ohrození*'. The DVO, a legal instrument established under Slovak anti-discrimination law that permits affirmative measures to compensate for historically entrenched disadvantage, formalised Tesco's commitment to prioritising Roma youth from NEET backgrounds in its in-work training programme. This gave the initiative legal recognition as an affirmative action measure rather than a discretionary corporate social responsibility (CSR) activity, with annual reporting obligations to the human rights centre.¹⁰² The second instrument was the development of a broader 'Shared Opportunities' strategic partnership framework covering six interconnected programme areas, of which the Development Programme and Dual Vocational Education are the core employment-facing components.¹⁰³

Funding for the partnership is drawn from multiple sources: Tesco's own corporate foundation and CSR budget; ESF-funded projects under the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family (MPSVR) supporting measures of active labour market policy, and scaling-up of social innovations; a Ministry of Education (MŠVVM) programme supporting adult education; and MPSVR-administered support for children in dual vocational education.¹⁰⁴ This multi-source financing reflects the cross-sectoral nature of the intervention but also introduces a structural vulnerability: the absence of a single, long-term public funding stream means that programme continuity depends on the continued willingness of each funder to renew its contribution.

Case description

The Tesco-ČVO partnership now operates across four interconnected programme strands, each targeting a distinct phase of the youth-to-employment trajectory. These strands are not implemented in isolation; rather, participants may move between them as their circumstances develop, and the same individual may progress from dual vocational education as a school-age pupil to the Development Programme as a young adult, and from there into supported or standard employment.

The first strand, dual vocational education, targets children in the final years of primary school, predominantly ninth-graders but also younger pupils who leave school early and supports their transition into three-year secondary vocational programmes in the 'sales assistant' or 'commercial worker' occupations at five secondary vocational schools in Bratislava, Prešov, Lučenec, and Zvolen. Since 2021, 36 children have enrolled in practical training placements at Tesco stores under this strand.¹⁰⁵ ČVO's methodology involves a multi-stage recruitment and preparation process that begins many months before the academic year. Career counsellors at community centres and youth clubs conduct individual and group sessions to map pupils' interests and aspirations, organise excursions to secondary schools and employer premises, hold joint meetings with parents and Tesco representatives, and assign small motivational projects, such as designing a product logo or a store promotion, to familiarise pupils with the retail environment. Where necessary, ČVO provides supplementary tutoring for

¹⁰¹ *Človek v ohrození*. (2025a). *Podpora detí z MRK v systéme duálneho (a odborného) vzdelávania [Support for Children from Marginalised Roma Communities in the Dual (and Vocational) Education System]*. Internal programme documentation. Bratislava: *Človek v ohrození*.

¹⁰² TESCO STORES SR, a.s. (2023). *Rozvojový program pre nízkokvalifikovanú mládež z prostredia MRK v TESCO STORES SR, a.s. v spolupráci s organizáciou Človek v ohrození — Oznámenie dočasného vyrovnávacieho opatrenia [Development Programme for Low-Qualified Youth from Marginalised Roma Communities at TESCO STORES SR, a.s., in Cooperation with People in Need — Notification of a Temporary Equalisation Measure]*. Bratislava: Slovenské národné stredisko pre ľudské práva.

¹⁰³ *Človek v ohrození*. (2025b). *Spoločné príležitosti — inkluzívny program v oblasti vzdelávania a zamestnávania [Equal Opportunities — an Inclusive Programme in the Field of Education and Employment]*. Project summary document. Bratislava: *Človek v ohrození*.

¹⁰⁴ Mudroňová, M. (2025). Interview with the employment programme manager at *Človek v ohrození*. [Transcript on file with author.]

¹⁰⁵ Mudroňová 2025.

entry examinations. Once enrolled, pupils receive a scholarship contribution towards the travel costs and study materials and are accompanied to their first day of school and their first day of practical training at the store. A named contact person is established both at the school and at the accommodation facility.¹⁰⁶

A decisive methodological choice made by ČvO in its early negotiations with retail employers was to redirect their preference away from four-year maturita programmes and towards three-year vocational programmes, reflecting an honest assessment of the academic starting conditions of many Roma pupils from segregated primary schools. The organisation has also sought to extend engagement to so-called F-streams – two-year lower secondary programmes designed for pupils who did not complete primary school or who graduated from special schools at ISCED level 1. This willingness to engage with the lowest end of the qualification ladder distinguishes the programme from initiatives that implicitly require a degree of prior educational success to participate.¹⁰⁷

The second strand is the Development Programme, which constitutes the DVO formally notified to the national equality body. It targets Roma NEET youth aged 16 to 18 who have completed compulsory schooling but have not entered any further education or employment. The programme consists of four months of structured in-work training at a Tesco store, under the supervision of a designated experienced colleague (the 'Buddy'), a store manager responsible for overseeing the training plan, and a regional HR manager who provides support at entry and throughout the programme. The ČvO worker functions as an external case manager, visiting the participant regularly, monitoring their progress and wellbeing, and mediating any difficulties that arise between the participant, the store team, and family members. The programme began as a pilot in Malacky in 2023 and has since engaged 12 young people. Its goal is to bring participants to the standard required to independently perform the sales assistant role, with a view to subsequent employment either at Tesco or elsewhere in the retail sector. Moreover, ČvO and Tesco aim at scaling up the programme to other regions and to other vulnerable groups (such as youth leaving institutional care).^{108,109}

The third strand, the 'Youth Practice' (Prax pre mladých) scheme, operates through mainstream active labour policy measures administered by the labour offices that ČvO targets specifically to Roma youth aged 18 to 29. Ten young people have participated since 2023, with ČvO providing sustained accompaniment throughout the placement period and beyond. A fourth strand covers broader supported employment for Roma community members (as well as Ukrainian refugees) in regular Tesco positions on various contract forms. Across this strand, 71 individuals have been employed since the strategic partnership began, spanning brigade (casual) contracts, part-time positions, and full-time roles.¹¹⁰

All strands are underpinned by two cross-cutting activities. The first is employer sensitisation: ČvO has conducted three training workshops for Tesco store staff and management specifically addressing communication with and inclusion of colleagues from backgrounds of generational poverty. These workshops have included an audit of workplace inclusivity and in some cases individual or team supervision. The organisation has also developed a general employer manual for firms across Slovakia wishing to recruit from Roma communities, drawing on its accumulated practice knowledge.¹¹¹ The second is sustained external case management including mentoring support. The ČvO worker assigned to each participant maintains contact throughout the programme and the period immediately following its conclusion, acting as a bridge between the young person, the employer, the school, and the family. This continuity of personal relationship is identified by both ČvO and Tesco staff as a critical enabler of participant retention.¹¹²

¹⁰⁶ Človek v ohrození 2025a.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ TESCO STORES SR, a.s. 2023.

¹⁰⁹ Človek v ohrození 2025b.

¹¹⁰ Mudroňová 2025.

¹¹¹ Človek v ohrození 2025b.

¹¹² Mudroňová 2025.

Results and impact

The cumulative quantitative reach of the Tesco-ČvO strategic partnership since 2021 totals 129 individuals across all strands: 36 in dual vocational education, 12 in the Development Programme, 10 in the Youth Practice scheme, and 71 in various supported and regular employment contracts.¹¹³ While these numbers are modest relative to the scale of Roma youth unemployment, they represent a deliberately constructed model of deep, individualised support rather than a high-volume, low-intensity activation measure, and are best evaluated on qualitative rather than purely quantitative terms.

Participant trajectories illustrate the potential of the programme when sustained support is maintained over time. One notable case involves a young man from Bardejov, Bohuš, who was one of five Roma students in the dual vocational programme Retail Worker who were not selected by any employer for practical training. ČvO therefore approached Tesco, which accepted all five and enabled them to complete their work placements alongside their studies. His progression from the vocational training through to stable long-term work at Tesco has been documented in a short video produced by ČvO.¹¹⁴ Bohuš is also an example of the level of personal resilience that young Roma workers must demonstrate in order to succeed in the labour market, as during the first weeks of his work at the checkout no customers approached him.¹¹⁵ This also illustrates the dilemmas faced by employers: the manager of the respective Tesco store decided to retain him in the cashier position rather than move him to the stockroom, so that customers would become accustomed to being served by a Roma cashier, even though, due to the customer boycott of that employee, he was initially de facto unproductive.¹¹⁶



Another participant, Grétka, entered the Development Programme as a NEET young person and, on the strength of that experience, decided to re-enrol in secondary education and complete a journeyman's certificate as a

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-5BV4YIfvIc>

¹¹⁵ See also: Gdovinová, D. (2023). *Na prax ho nechceli, v obchode jeho pokladňu obchádzali. Bohuš zmaturoval a chce ísť na vysokú [He was not accepted for a traineeship, and customers avoided his checkout in the shop. Bohuš graduated from secondary school and intends to pursue higher education]*. Denník N 29.12.2023. Available at: <https://dennikn.sk/3751503/nechceli-ho-zobrat-na-prax-do-obchodu-lebo-je-rom-ako-bohus-zmaturoval-je-spokojny-v-praci-a-chce-ist-na-vysoku/>

¹¹⁶ Mudroňová 2025.

sales assistant, demonstrating that in-work training can function as a gateway back into formal education rather than a permanent substitute for it.¹¹⁷ These cases point to a common pattern: sustained accompaniment enables an initial foothold to develop over time into durable labour market attachment, with promotion as a realistic horizon.

Social impact beyond employment has also been documented. ČvO reports that multiple families whose adult members have been supported into Tesco employment have used their resulting income to stabilise their housing situation – through legalisation of existing structures, renovation, or access to rental accommodation – reflecting the household-level financial multiplier of a stable formal wage.

Analysis

The Tesco-ČvO partnership represents a structurally distinct approach to Roma youth employment integration, whose key differentiating features merit careful analysis. The first is the deliberate combination of two complementary intervention logics: the Buddy-based in-work training model of the Development Programme addresses immediate employability, whilst the dual vocational education strand invests in the longer-term human capital pathway that eventually yields a formal qualification. By operating both simultaneously, the partnership avoids the false choice between ‘skills first’ and ‘work first’ approaches and provides a continuum of options calibrated to the starting conditions of each individual.

The second distinguishing feature is the role of the NGO as a sustained external broker rather than a one-time placement intermediary. ČvO’s community centres and youth clubs provide a pre-existing relational infrastructure with Roma families and young people that predates and outlasts any particular programme cycle. This means that recruitment is grounded in established trust, and that post-programme follow-up is not an afterthought but a natural continuation of the centre’s community presence. The organisation explicitly contrasts this with the dominant public employment service model, which it characterises as addressing ‘recidivism rather than prevention’, engaging individuals only once they are already long-term unemployed rather than accompanying young people through the critical transition from primary school onwards.¹¹⁸

A third strength is the employer sensitisation component. The observation that inclusive corporate policies do not automatically translate into inclusive individual behaviour is well-evidenced in the employment discrimination literature, and ČvO’s three rounds of training for Tesco staff – addressing communication with colleagues from backgrounds of generational poverty, rather than simply providing information about Roma culture – reflect an operationally sophisticated understanding of this gap.¹¹⁹ The commissioning of a general employer manual that can be shared beyond the Tesco partnership further demonstrates ambition to generate system-level influence beyond the individual programme.

Even where corporate leadership has formally committed to inclusion, implementation can be undermined at the local level: store managers and frontline supervisors retain sufficient discretionary power to prevent a genuinely supportive environment from forming for vulnerable employees, whether through inaction or unchallenged team dynamics. This is why *Človek v ohrození*’s sensitisation workshops deliberately target store-level staff rather than headquarters alone.

The partnership’s principal structural limitation is the absence of stable long-term financing. ČvO candidly reports that insufficient systemic funding is the primary constraint on programme capacity, resulting in the

¹¹⁷ See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TipQK_BW8-Y

¹¹⁸ Mudroňová 2025.

¹¹⁹ Hidas, S. et al. (2016). *Veľa práce na úradoch práce: Efektivita a účinnosť služieb zamestnanosti [Heavy Workload at Labour Offices: Efficiency and Effectiveness of Employment Services]*. Bratislava: Inštitút finančnej politiky. Available at: https://www.mfsr.sk/files/sk/financie/hodnota-za-peniaze/revizia-vydavkov/socialne-politiky/Sluzby_zamestnanosti_final_20161010.pdf;

Kureková, L., Salner, A. and Farenzenová, A. (2013). *Implementation of Activation Works in Slovakia*. Bratislava: SGI. Available at: https://stary-web.governance.sk/assets/files/publikacie/ACTIVATION_WORKS_REPORT_SGI.pdf

Petráš, J. (2020). *Aktivačné práce neaktívnych neaktivujú [Activation Works Do Not Activate the Inactive]*. Bratislava: Inštitút sociálnej politiky. Available at: <https://institutsocialnejpolitiky.sk/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Aktivacne-prace.pdf>.

organisation working at the edge of its ability to accompany the number of young people it has committed to supporting.¹²⁰ The multi-source funding model, blending Tesco Foundation contributions with multiple EU-funded and nationally-administered project streams, provides financial diversification but also administrative burden and the ever-present risk of simultaneous non-renewal across funding lines. Unlike a nationally institutionalised programme with a statutory budget, the partnership remains dependent on the voluntary commitment of its corporate partner and on success in competitive grant rounds.

A second limitation concerns the systemic context within which the programme operates. Slovak ministries responsible for employment, education, and social affairs function with limited co-ordination, and the measures available from different agencies (activation works from the labour offices, vocational training subsidies from the education ministry, youth employment schemes from MPSVR) are not designed as a coherent integrated system. ČvO must navigate this fragmentation pragmatically, using the most appropriate measure for each individual's situation, but the absence of a single integrated case management and funding pathway adds complexity and creates gaps at transitions between measures.¹²¹

Thirdly, ČvO's activities take place in a context that discourages young people from continuing in education or labour-market preparation. In the short term, undeclared work offers a more attractive option, providing higher immediate income as no taxes or social contributions are to be paid; however, this also means no entitlement to unemployment or sickness benefits and no accumulation of worked years needed for pension entitlement. In addition, under Slovak law, individuals working only a few hours per week cease to be covered by the state in terms of health and social insurance contributions. As a result, longer participation in development programmes, typically combined with limited earnings, mean they had to start paying these contributions themselves.

Finally, despite declarations, Slovakia do not, in principle, support innovation that would allow piloting initiatives tailored to the specific needs of different groups. For example, labour offices show only limited willingness to recognise NGO-implemented programmes as innovative active labour market measures (ALMPs), although this is possible under the current legislation.

Lessons learned and recommendations

The Tesco-ČvO partnership offers several transferable lessons for the design of private sector engagement in Roma employment integration, with particular relevance for large retail and service sector employers with nationwide networks.

The most fundamental lesson is that corporate inclusive employment commitments require a dedicated external partner with deep community roots. Tesco's store network and human resources infrastructure are necessary but not sufficient conditions for the programme's success; without ČvO's pre-existing relationships with Roma families, its sustained individual accompaniment model, and its capacity to mediate between participants and the store environment, the programme would not achieve the depth of support that enables the most disadvantaged NEET young people to complete and benefit from it. This points to the need for public policy to subsidise and institutionalise the NGO broker role, rather than expecting civil society organisations to finance it through competitive project grants alone.¹²²¹²³

The decision to design programmes to the actual starting conditions of target participants, specifically, the shift from four-year programmes with the secondary school leaving examination to three-year vocational programmes is both a practical and an ethical commitment. It requires retail employers to accept a longer development timeline and lower initial productivity from trainees, and it requires school and training partners to invest additional pedagogical support. The willingness of Tesco to accept these conditions is directly attributable to the trust relationship built through sustained partnership with ČvO. Replication of this model

¹²⁰ Mudroňová 2025.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Mudroňová 2025.

¹²³ Človek v ohrození 2025b.

therefore depends not only on the availability of willing corporate partners but on the prior existence of a capable NGO interlocutor with credibility in both the community and the corporate world.¹²⁴

At the level of public policy, the most urgent recommendation is the development of an effective school-to-job transition program supported by an integrated case management framework that follows Roma youth from primary school through to the first years of stable employment, spanning the mandates of multiple ministries without requiring the young person or their support worker to navigate bureaucratic transitions alone. ČvO's observation that the current system deals with 'recidivism rather than prevention' – intervening after labour market exclusion is fully established rather than accompanying young people through the critical transition at age 15–16 – identifies a structural design flaw that no programme operating within the current system can fully compensate for.¹²⁵

The DVO instrument, whilst welcomed by ČvO as a signal of Tesco's commitment, currently functions primarily as an accountability and reporting mechanism. Its potential as a policy lever would be enhanced if the Slovak National Centre for Human Rights were to develop an active outreach function that engages other large employers, particularly in retail, manufacturing, logistics, and food processing, where the occupational profile is comparable to Tesco's, using the Tesco–ČvO model as a demonstration case. The creation of a cross-sector working group, convened by the Centre and including employer associations, could translate the individual partnership model into sector-level recruitment standards.¹²⁶

The Tesco–ČvO partnership demonstrates that structured, long-term private sector engagement, when grounded in authentic community relationships and honest adaptation to the starting conditions of the most disadvantaged young Roma, can generate employment outcomes that more standardised labour market programmes fail to achieve. The challenge for Slovak public policy is to move from facilitating such partnerships as exceptional civil society innovations to embedding their logic in a coherent, sustainably funded, and cross-ministerially governed system of Roma youth employment support.

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¹²⁴ Človek v ohrození 2025.

¹²⁵ Mudroňová 2025.

¹²⁶ TESCO STORES SR, a.s. 2023.

SR pre rómske komunity, p. 39. Available at:

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4.4. From public employment to open market (HU)

Introduction

Roma are the country's largest ethnic minority (about 876,000 people) facing widespread antigypsyism, discrimination, and systemic barriers in all four policy areas¹²⁷.

Historically, many Roma were employed in low-skilled sectors such as mining, metallurgy, and construction. Following the political transition, these sectors collapsed, and Roma encountered immediate exclusion due to low educational qualifications and increasing prejudice¹²⁸. This legacy persists today, as 16% of Roma aged 15–64 have not finished primary school, and 63% have only basic qualifications, compared to 1% and 19% for non-Roma, respectively¹²⁹. Also, the NEET rate among Roma aged 16–24 is significantly higher (36%) compared to non-Roma (10%)¹³⁰. These challenges are also related to the cardinal issue of the reduction of the compulsory school age to 16. Roma employment is marked by low participation in the primary labour market, low-paid and short-term jobs, and over-representation in public work schemes¹³¹. Discrimination in recruitment is rising: 13% reported discrimination in 2016, increasing to 34% in 2024¹³².

Mainstream employment policies have been widely criticised for lacking quantifiable targets and failing to address the structural causes of antigypsyism and other elements hindering Roma to enter the primary labour market¹³³.

While most National Roma Strategic Frameworks (NRSFs) are targeted instruments, the Hungarian National Social Inclusion Strategy 2030 (HNSIS) takes a mainstreaming approach, addressing Roma within the broader group of the “poorest of the poor” rather than through exclusive targeting¹³⁴. Further targeted policies include

¹²⁷ Roma Civil Monitor. (2022). *Civil society monitoring report on the quality of the national strategic framework for Roma equality, inclusion, and participation in Hungary*. Luxembourg: Publication Office of the European Union. Available at: <https://romacivilmonitoring.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/RCM2-2022-C1-Hungary-FINAL-PUBLISHED-CATALOGUE.pdf>

¹²⁸ Ministry of Interior. (2021). *Hungarian National Social Inclusion Strategy 2030*. Available at: <https://szocialisportal.hu/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/MNTFS2030.pdf>

¹²⁹ Roma Civil Monitor. (2018). *Civil society monitoring report on implementation of the national Roma integration strategy in Hungary. Assessing the progress in four key policy areas of the strategy*. Luxembourg: Publication Office of the European Union. Available at: <https://cps.ceu.edu/sites/cps.ceu.edu/files/attachment/basicpage/3034/rcm-civil-society-monitoring-report-2-hungary-2018-eprint-fin-2.pdf>

¹³⁰ EU Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2024). *Rights of Roma and Travellers In 13 European Countries Perspectives from the Roma Survey 2024*. Luxembourg: Publication Office of the European Union. Available at: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2025-roma-survey-2024_en.pdf

¹³¹ Roma Civil Monitor 2022

¹³² EU Agency for Fundamental Rights 2024

¹³³ Roma Civil Monitor 2022

¹³⁴ Ibid.

the Youth Guarantee Programme uses active labour market tools to facilitate the employment of young people below the age of 25. Other initiatives such as the "Nő az esély" (Women's Growing Programme), that supports the employment of 2,200 disadvantaged, low-educated Roma women in public services. The FETE 300 Programme, launched in 2019, is a comprehensive social inclusion initiative targeting the 300 most disadvantaged settlements. It addresses social, educational, healthcare, and partly employment-related issues, particularly in areas where many Roma live in deep poverty. Another initiative is run by the Directorate General for Social Opportunities under the Ministry of Interior. Its nationwide "Actively for Knowledge" programme aims to improve the employability of disadvantaged people, including through training for roles such as "family supporters" or "pasta makers," though the labour market relevance of these occupations has been questioned. These programmes are often criticised for delays, limited coverage, and weak links to the primary labour market, with low transition rates. The PWS, which is the focus of the case study, is discussed in more detail below.

The funding of these programmes primarily flows from European Union funds such as the ESF+, ERDF, and EAFRD, as well as national budgetary allocations for public employment (PWS).

Civil society initiatives also contribute. For example, the Integrom programme supports Roma youth aged 18–35 with at least a secondary education in accessing jobs in domestic and international companies, while Partners Hungary trains intercultural mediators to improve communication and trust between Roma job seekers and employers. However, as these initiatives are largely project-based, their long-term sustainability is limited, and they are not designed to address the challenges in a comprehensive way.

Income support schemes do not guarantee a decent minimum income, and the welfare system's quality and stability are weakening. Government Decree No. 179 omits key measures such as debt management counselling and support for income-generating activities, which in any case have limited impact. Social assistance for working-age people has also declined: the number of employment replacement benefit recipients fell by 34% between 2019 and 2024, while the monthly amount—HUF 22,800 (EUR 57), unchanged since 2015—remains insufficient to cover basic living costs¹³⁵.

Background information

The PWS, originally introduced in the mid-1990s, was restructured in its current form in 2011 as a uniform "Work Instead of Benefit" scheme coordinated by the Ministry of Interior. Implemented in nearly 3,000 localities, it targets long-term unemployed, low-skilled individuals—mainly in disadvantaged regions where Roma communities are overrepresented and face severe socioeconomic challenges. Funding is predominantly state budget financed, with occasional co-financing through European Social Fund instruments¹³⁶ and contributions from local governments. Stakeholders, include national ministries, local governments, and church-affiliated organisations such as the Hungarian Reformed Aid Foundation, Hungarian Maltese Aid, Baptist Aid, Saint Luke Greek Catholic Aid and the Hungarian Interchurch Aid that are also public employers¹³⁷.

¹³⁵ Roma Civil Monitor. (2025). *Civil society monitoring report on the implementation of the national strategic framework for Roma equality, inclusion, and participation in Hungary*. Luxembourg: Publication Office of the European Union. Available at: <https://www.romacivilmonitoring.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/RCM2-2024-C1-Hungary-FINAL-ISBN.pdf>

¹³⁶ Providing additional support specifically for vocational training and the development of social cooperatives.

¹³⁷ Ministry of Interior. (2011–2016). *Public Employment Yearbook*. Available at: https://kozfoqlalkoztatas.kormany.hu/akadalymentes/download/2/fa/c2000/Public%20Employment%20Yearbook%202011-2016.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

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Case description

The PWS aims to fill the gap in regions where primary labour market demand is stagnant or non-existent, providing the only legal income option for hundreds of thousands of workers who lack professional qualifications or have been durably excluded from the primary market. Implementation is organised into three distinct pillars: longer-term municipality-led employment for local public tasks, district "Start Work" model programmes tailored to specific local needs (such as agriculture or road maintenance), and large-scale national sectoral projects addressing infrastructure, flood protection, and cultural preservation that requires skilled workforce¹³⁸. The primary employers are local municipalities, where workers engage in low-skilled manual labour related to public infrastructure and maintenance, including construction, drainage systems, agriculture, farm labour, and street cleaning¹³⁹.

The scope of action is extensive, having involved 652,200 individuals between 2011 and 2016, with a 2016 peak of 223,469 participants¹⁴⁰. The educational level of most individuals in the PWSs is either less than 8 grades or completed primary school¹⁴¹. A general overrepresentation of Roma in the public work programme can be observed,¹⁴² their proportion in the PWS is around 20%¹⁴³. This can be further supported by the fact that in August 2025, the highest average monthly number of participants was recorded in counties where most Roma reside in Hungary¹⁴⁴.

Participants of the PWS are offered with an initial 12-month contract that may be extended by an additional 6 months with the same public employer; however, participants can switch employers and continue in the PWS for several years¹⁴⁵. According to a governmental decree the wage in the PWS is the 50% of the guaranteed minimum wage. It is HUF 145 400 gross in 2025 for individuals possessing no qualifications and HUF 174 400 gross for positions requiring at least upper secondary education and a vocational qualification¹⁴⁶.

Participants' motivations are multifaceted. Unemployment benefit lasts only three months and amounts to 60% of former gross income; afterward, individuals receive just HUF 22,800 (EUR 57) per month, which does not cover basic needs. In some regions, the PWS is the only employment option, making it a default choice amid socioeconomic exclusion and limited prospects. Additionally, young people leave school at the age of 16 to join the PWS, as its income exceeds available scholarships.

Results and impact

The PWS has significantly reduced national unemployment rates. For instance, the national unemployment rate was 11,3 % in 2010 that decreased to 4,4 % in 2025¹⁴⁷. It can be stated that the programme provided employment opportunities for a substantial population hand in hand with a certain level of income. As mentioned, the programme introduced a "new approach" toward a "work instead of allowance" principle,

¹³⁸ Ministry of Interior 2011-2016

¹³⁹ IMF Library n. d.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

Ministry of Interior n.d.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Roma Civil Monitor 2025

¹⁴³ Hungler, S. and Kende, Á. (2021). *Diverting Welfare Paths: Ethnicisation of Unemployment and Public Work in Hungary*. Available at: <https://journals.openedition.org/eces/6299?lang=en>

¹⁴⁴ Ministry of Interior. (2025). *Monthly briefing on the development of public employment*. Available at: <https://kozfooglalkoztataskormany.hu/download/c/b5/73000/augusztus%20havi%20t%C3%A1j%C3%A9koztat%C3%B3%2020251013.pdf>

¹⁴⁵ Ministry of Interior n. d.

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¹⁴⁶ Ministry of Interior PWS Portal. (last accessed 12.02.2026), *What is the amount of the public employment wage?* Available at: <https://kozfooglalkoztataskormany.hu/mekkora-a-kozfooglalkoztatasi-ber-osszege>

¹⁴⁷ Central Statistical Office (last accessed 21.02.2026), *Economic activity of the population aged 15–74 by gender, per month*. Available at: https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_files/mun/hu/mun0097.html

absorbing nearly 70% of related expenditures to maintain public infrastructure and support rural development. However, the impact on other policy fields like housing has been negligible; despite providing legal income, the average PWS wage remains far below the level required for elementary existence, meaning most participants cannot afford to leave segregated settlements. While participants have experienced positive impacts regarding self-esteem, work culture, and mental activation, the scheme is widely criticized for its low effectiveness in labour market reintegration, with only about 10–13% of workers transitioning to the primary market annually¹⁴⁸.

Critical deficiencies include a persistent "lock-in" effect, where prolonged participation actually reduces the likelihood of finding primary market employment, and the diversion of funds from more efficient labour market tools. The programme is primarily sustained through state budget allocations although the government is currently scaling back the scheme—participation in PWS in 2024 is 66, 624¹⁴⁹—to incentivize transitions into a booming primary labour market facing severe shortages.

Analysis of the case

As mentioned above the PWS contributed to decrease the unemployment rate in Hungary as well as provides a modest income to participants. However, when calculating unemployment rate, it would be crucial to differentiate ratios of people engaged in PWS and in the primary labour market. Additionally, a distinction needs to be made between decreased unemployment rate (being employed) and quality decent life considering the low wage rates in the PWS programmes. Since the salaries are well below the minimum wage, PWS offers cheap labour to employers mostly to municipalities and state institutions as well as keeps participants at the margins of the society in socioeconomic terms. ERRC expressed that the programme runs counter to EU objectives of achieving high employment and social protection levels, improving living standards and quality of life, and promoting economic and social cohesion and solidarity, as it indirectly discriminates against unemployed Roma people.¹⁵⁰

People engaged in the PWS especially those who perform activities on the streets are being stigmatized by the society and they encounter additional marks against other employers when aiming to shift from the PWS to the primary labour market¹⁵¹.

Furthermore, PWS is used as a tool for political manipulation of participants. Participation in PWS is conditioned on political support of the mayors if otherwise individuals can be excluded from PWS that is in most of the times the only one source of income to families¹⁵².

In order to illustrate how Roma as a workforce is considered by the current politics in Hungary it is pivotal to call attention to a quite recent outrageous statement of the Minister of Transportation Mr. Janos Lazar. The Minister said: *"The reserve of this country is the Hungarian people, not migrants. The decision to close the border means that in Hungary, everyone must be given an opportunity, and we will not allow anyone into the country who is not Hungarian. So, if there are no migrants, and someone has to clean the toilet on the InterCity, because Hungarian voters are not exactly rushing enthusiastically to clean someone else's sh*t-covered toilet, then we must uncover the internal reserves. And the internal reserve means the Gypsy population of Hungary. This is reality."*¹⁵³

¹⁴⁸ Roma Civil Monitor 2018

IMF Library n. d.

¹⁴⁹ Ministry of Interior n. d.

¹⁵⁰ Rorke, B. (2019). *Road to nowhere for Hungary's Roma: Public works scheme is futile and insidious*. Available at: <https://www.errc.org/news/road-to-nowhere-for-hungarys-roma-public-works-scheme-is-futile-and-insidious>

¹⁵¹ Ibid

¹⁵² Cummings, M. (2019). *Study documents electoral corruption in Hungary*. Available at: <https://news.yale.edu/2019/04/22/study-documents-electoral-corruption-hungary>

¹⁵³ YouTube Chanell of Minister Janos Lazar. (2026), Lázárinfó - Bárhol, bárkivel, bármiről - Balatonalmádi from 8:43. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fURkD_T_MhY

The Minister's statement demonstrates an exclusionary and degrading approach to Roma both on individual and community level. Roma are considered as objects of economy and a tool that could be used to tackle economic needs and labour shortages only in occupations that are undesired for non-Roma.

Lessons learned and recommendations

Employment of Roma has been partly tackled by the PWS until 2016 after which the government has aimed to channel public workers to the primary labour market to tackle labour shortages. The efficiency of the shift can be largely questioned, since significant number of third country nationals have been employed especially since 2019. The number of these employees increased from 44,682 in 2019 to 78,026 in 2024¹⁵⁴. An additional layer is related to the prevailing political rhetoric and understanding about the role of Roma in the labour market. Roma's place is rather considered in the low-skilled sector associated with exclusion and humiliating approach of the government. Additionally, apart from the positive elements of the PWS (being employed, receiving income) most participants encountered increased dependency relations to the local stakeholders especially to the mayor and to the municipality. This served as a good opportunity to further direct, manipulate PWS participants in order to maintain local level power relations. Participants of the PWS cannot be called in a classical sense as the beneficiaries due to the above-mentioned deficiencies of the programme. Instead, the PWS strengthened the position and role of the local municipalities and mayors as well as they absorbed the working potentials of participants translating it into cheap municipal labour.

Recommendations:

- The government should increase the mandatory school age to 18 and develop an educational strategy targeting Roma youth with an aim to decrease school dropout and NEET rates. This should be harmonized with the objectives of the ERSF.
- The government and municipalities should focus on creating adequate job opportunities with competitive salaries in the primary labour market in marginalised areas in order to avoid PWS is to be the only job opportunity.
- The government and municipalities should deliver trainings to PWS participants on fields where labour market demand is real and competitive salaries offered.
- Municipalities should deliver motivational trainings to PWS participants on a monthly basis contributing to develop future plans, visions and facilitating their social mobility.
- Job opportunities including the PWS should meet with EU objectives on social protection levels, improving living standards and quality of life. Salaries in the PWS to be increased at least to the guaranteed minimum wage.
- Governmental and municipal commitment are needed ensuring that PWS participants are politically not manipulated and PWS is not used for political purposes or other form of coercion.
- The duration of the universal employment benefit should be extended to a minimum of six months and its amount to the 80% of the former income's gross.
- Legally recognise antigypsyism and establish a specific body (it can be even a department within the equality body) that enforces and monitors the AG law and makes state and municipality institutions accountable on its provisions.
- CSOs should unite, organise and represent the needs of PWS participants and advocate for their rights and dignity.
- CSOs should connect PWS participants with potential employers and facilitate PWS participants' transfer to the primary labour market.

¹⁵⁴ Bodor, K. (2024). *Foreign workers in Hungary: key facts and labour market challenges*. Available at: <https://collections.fes.de/publikationen/content/titleinfo/1572635>

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4.5. *Acceder: A targeted employment pathway for Roma inclusion and equality (ES)*

Introduction

Spain is home to an estimated 1 to 1.3 million Roma,¹⁵⁵ who continue to face structural barriers despite significant social progress since the late 1970s. Data¹⁵⁶ show persistently high rates of poverty (94% at risk of poverty), child poverty (96% at risk of poverty) and housing deprivation (30%), as well as unequal access to quality education (only 36% of young Roma have completed at least upper-secondary education and 28% attend a segregated school) and continued experiences of discrimination (35% say they were discriminated against in the year before the survey). Focusing on employment these inequalities can also be found: only 31% of Roma adults are in paid work (compared to the 71% in the general population), NEET rates among youth reach 58% (compared to 10% in the general population), and Roma women¹⁵⁷ face particularly acute disadvantage, with employment levels as low as 16%.

These challenges are rooted in a long history of antigypsyism and in the marginal position of traditional Roma livelihoods, often centred on self-employment and informal trade. Limited educational attainment, intersecting vulnerabilities and widespread prejudice further constrain access to stable employment, reinforcing cycles of poverty, precarious work and disengagement from training opportunities.

In general terms, public employment services in Spain have not developed targeted measures aimed at the Roma population, which has limited the participation of the Roma. Social benefits have historically been disconnected from labour market activation measures, thus hindering the transition of many Roma families from a predominantly welfare-based approach to one focused on inclusion into the labour market. Since 2020, a minimum income system has been implemented in Spain which, although it still has many areas for improvement, represents a step forward in the fight against extreme poverty.

Over the past two decades, the European Social Fund has supported long-term targeted initiatives in Spain that allow to tackle structural inequalities. Programmes such as the *Acceder* have delivered effective solutions, offering personalised pathways and strong partnerships with public authorities and with employers. Experience proves that target approaches outperform mainstream employment measures, which often lack the data and tools needed to reach Roma communities effectively.

Background information

The *Acceder* programme was launched by Fundación Secretariado Gitano (FSG)¹⁵⁸ as a pilot in 1998-1999 in Madrid and, thanks to European Social Funds, scaled in 2000, being present today thorough Spain in 15 regions and over 80 localities. It was created to address the lack of targeted support for Roma inclusion in the labour market in Spain and to promote access to salaried employment through specialised support. *Acceder* brings together a multilevel partnership involving national, regional and local administrations, the European Union, private companies and the Roma community itself. Its funding relies on a mixed model in which the European Social Fund has been the main driver, complemented by state, regional and municipal contributions. The programme runs without pause until today.

¹⁵⁵ Flores Martos, R. (coord.). (2025). *IX Informe sobre exclusión y desarrollo social en España [9th Report on Social Exclusion and Social Development in Spain]*. Available at: <https://www.caritas.es/main-files/uploads/2025/10/IX-INFORME-FOESSA.pdf>

¹⁵⁶ EU Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2025). *Rights of Roma and Travellers in 13 European countries - Perspectives from the Roma Survey 2024 – Country Data – Spain*. Available at: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-country_data-roma_survey-spain.pdf

¹⁵⁷ Fundación Secretariado Gitano. (2019). *Comparative study on the situation of the Roma population in Spain in terms of employment and poverty 2018. Executive Summary*. Available at: https://www.gitanos.org/upload/52/43/Executive_Report-Comparative_Study_Situation_of_Roma_Population_Spain_employment_and_poverty_2018.pdf

¹⁵⁸ Fundación Secretariado Gitano is an intercultural, non-profit social organisation that works for more than 40 years for the promotion and equal opportunities of Roma in Spain and Europe. <https://www.gitanos.org/>

Case description

The *Acceder* programme¹⁵⁹ is implemented by FSG's intercultural, multidisciplinary teams (40% of FSG's staff is Roma), which coordinate the intervention through personalised inclusion pathways that combine an initial employability assessment, individual and group guidance, market-oriented vocational training and job intermediation.



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On top of the *Acceder* programme's priority focus on salaried employment, actions aimed to support beneficiaries with lower levels of employability and other minor activities related to self-employment have been developed, including social enterprises such as Vedelar, Nabut and Uzipen (which focus on participants with greater vulnerability).

Beyond direct support, the programme implements complementary actions essential for systemic inclusion:

- awareness campaigns,¹⁶¹ between 2005-2007 two FSG's awareness campaigns focused on Roma employment, dealing with discrimination in employment and about the inclusion potential of salaried employment. In recent years (2020-2021), two more campaigns focused on employment for young Roma and vindicating the right of the Roma to decent employment.
- technical assistance to public services, on the *Acceder* model and on social inclusion through salaried employment targeted projects; and
- research on Roma employment, including comparative studies on employment and poverty published since 2005.¹⁶²

Over time, *Acceder* has evolved through phases of national expansion (2000-2004), methodological consolidation (2005-2008), specialisation in job intermediation (2008-2012) and, more recently, innovation (from 2013) through digital upskilling and dual training models such as 'Learning by Doing' (which combines 840 hours of theory and practice and achieves insertion rates of 55%). The programme has expanded over

¹⁵⁹ Fundación Secretariado Gitano and Red2Red Consultores. (2021). *Evaluation of the results and impact of the Acceder Programme 2000-2020. Executive Summary*. Available at: https://www.gitanos.org/upload/54/23/FSG_Informe_Acceder_Resumen_ejecutivo_ENG.pdf

¹⁶⁰ Images extracted from: Fundación Secretariado Gitano and Red2Red Consultores 2021

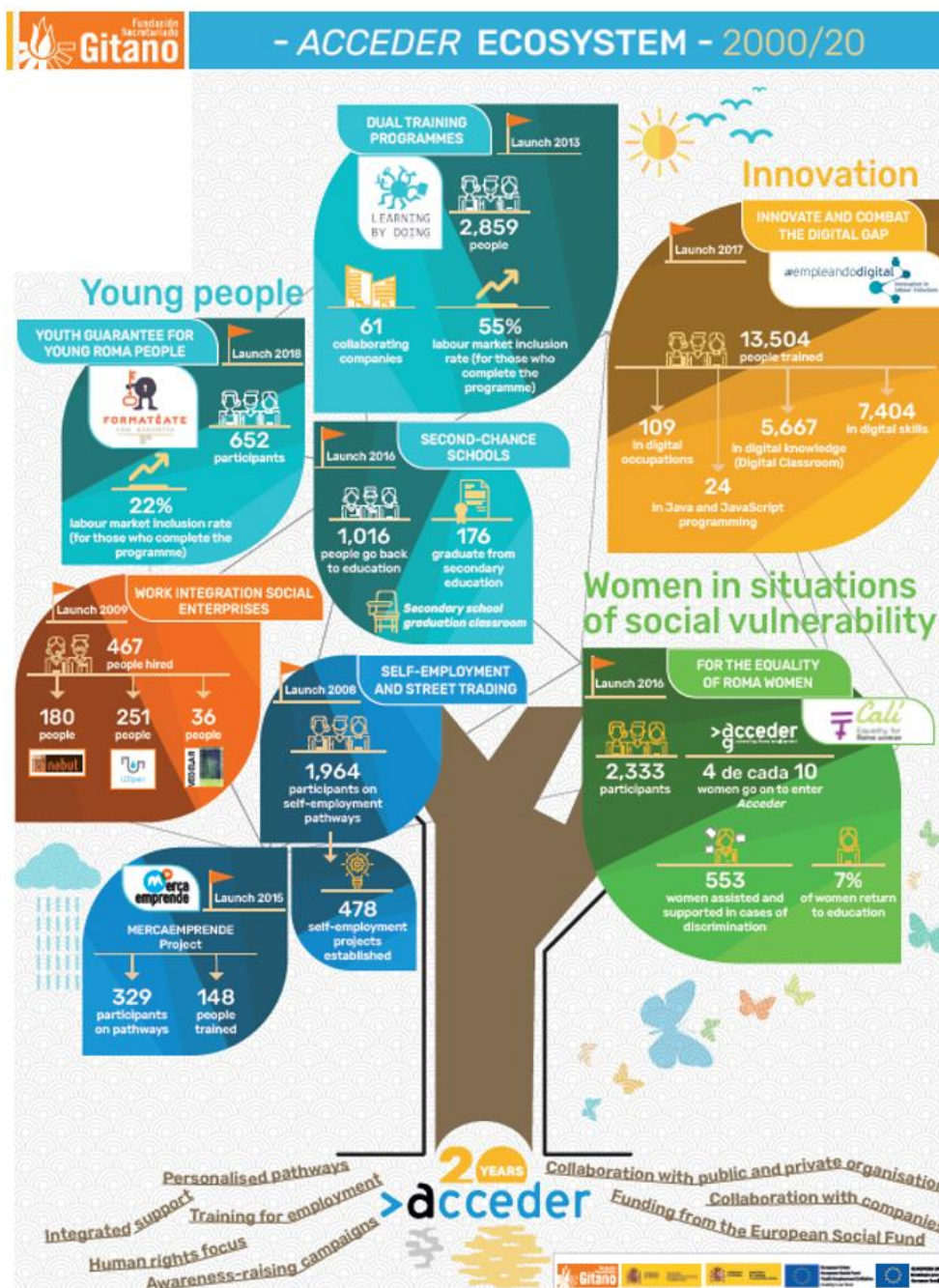
¹⁶¹ <https://www.gitanos.org/newsroom/campaigns/>

¹⁶² Fundación Secretariado Gitano. (2005). *Roma population and employment. A comparative study*. Available at: https://www.gitanos.org/resources/research/roma_population_and_employment_a_comparative_study/

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Fundación Secretariado Gitano 2019. A new edition of this study is expected to be published in 2027.

time to integrate a wide range of new initiatives, evolving from a single project into a genuine ecosystem of employment and training measures.



Outreach relies on trust-building through intercultural mediation, the visibility of Roma role models, educational reinforcement and gender-sensitive strategies to engage Roma women. *Acceder's* methodology emphasises flexibility, employer collaboration and intercultural participation (also supporting non-Roma users to mirror real labour market diversity) while maintaining high efficiency, with an average cost per pathway far below mainstream services (EUR 1,925 compared to EUR 6,000).

Results and impact

In the year 2020 an evaluation on the results and impact of the programme¹⁶³ was created. This evaluation highlights the great coverage of the Roma population achieved by the *Acceder* and proves the impact and efficiency of the programme.

The *Acceder* has a significant scale:¹⁶⁴ since 2000 until 2024, more than 182,000 people have participated; 118,504 contracts have been signed and 47,494 people have found a job (almost 4 of every 10 participants get a job), 73% of them Roma. Many of the jobs managed by *Acceder* continue to be concentrated in low-skilled occupations within the service sector (such as retail, cleaning, hospitality, and industrial labour). However, in recent years there has been a deliberate effort to break into emerging and more skilled sectors, including technology. It has also trained 53,495 people, and collaborated with 29,245 companies, as well as supported 4,049 self-employment pathways. Companies are mainly motivated to employ Roma because of the focus of the project in providing professional services and well-trained workers. In *Acceder's* experience, other approaches based on offering economic incentives to companies for employing Roma tend to produce only short-term results.

The impact of the *Acceder* programme has inspired the development of other initiatives in related fields, such as the *Promociona* programme,¹⁶⁵ focused on improving the educational success of Roma students (since 2009), and the *Calí* programme,¹⁶⁶ promoting equality for Roma women (since 2016). The EU Roma Network¹⁶⁷ was also created on the basis of *Acceder's* success. Launched in 2007 by the Spanish Government in cooperation with FSG, this transnational cooperation network aims to promote Roma equality and inclusion by improving the use of European Cohesion Policy Funds, particularly the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF).

Acceder's impact on employment policies is significant: the 2023 Spanish Employment Law¹⁶⁸ recognises Roma as a priority group, national inclusion strategies are built on *Acceder's* methodology, and Spain's first Employment Plan for the Roma (2025–2028)¹⁶⁹ integrates its personalised pathways into national policy, which is a key milestone for employment policies and Roma in Spain.

During 2026, the Joint Research Center of the EC is conducting a contrafactual evaluation to assess the impact of *Acceder's* personalised pathways for Roma employment funded by the ESF.

A soon-to-be-published evaluation of return on investment of the programme has recently been created. This is a follow up of the 2013 evaluation,¹⁷⁰ that proved that in the period 2006–2011 of the *Acceder*, every euro invested created an economic value of €1.38.

¹⁶³ Fundación Secretariado Gitano and Red2Red Consultores 2021

¹⁶⁴ Fundación Secretariado Gitano. (2025). *FSG Annual Report 2024*. Available at: https://www.gitanos.org/resources/publications/fsq_annual_report_2024/

¹⁶⁵ https://www.gitanos.org/what_we_do/education/promociona_programme/

¹⁶⁶ https://www.gitanos.org/programa_cali/

¹⁶⁷ <https://www.euromanet.eu/>

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¹⁶⁹ Ministry of Labour and Social Economy. (2025). *Plan de Actuación para la mejora de la empleabilidad de la población gitana 2025-2028 [Action Plan for the Improvement of the Employability of the Roma Population 2025–2028]*. Available at: <https://prensa.mites.gob.es/webPrensa/api/file/adjunto/3795>

¹⁷⁰ Fresno, J. M. (Coord.) et al. (2013). *The employment of vulnerable people: a smart social investment*. Cáritas, Red Cross, ONCE Foundation, Fundación Secretariado Gitano. Available at: https://www.gitanos.org/resources/publications/the_employment_of_vulnerable_people_a_smart_social_investment/

Analysis of the case

Widely recognised in Spain and across Europe as a good practice,¹⁷¹ *Acceder* also represents a promising model for transfer to other European contexts. Its strengths lie in high employment insertion rates, a robust methodology based on personalised pathways, strong alliances with multiple and diverse typology of companies (multinational, national, regional and local), and multisectoral and intercultural teams. Training models are adapted to both participant needs and employer demands, and its cost-effectiveness surpasses mainstream services.

There are, however, areas that require further improvement: many jobs remain temporary or low-skilled, women remain concentrated in undervalued sectors, rural coverage is limited and extreme vulnerability can hinder continuity in training.

Opportunities include the new State Employment Plan, which include new complementary resources for Roma employment and a greater involvement of the public employment services, with which the *Acceder* works closely. Also, legal recognition of Roma as a priority group in the Spanish Employment Plan, digital-skills initiatives and the potential scaling of *Acceder's* model within public employment services, are opportunities. On the other hand, threats remain linked to structural antigypsyism, low educational attainment and labour-market volatility.

Lessons learned and recommendations

The experience of *Acceder* shows that successful Roma inclusion relies on long-term, personalised employment pathways, a targeted yet non-segregated approach and the involvement of companies. Testing the model through an initial pilot and scaling it later proved essential, as did using role models to inspire communities. Strong partnerships and a combination of service provision and advocacy ensure both impact and long-term sustainability. All of this is possible thanks to long-term ESF-backed investment.

Building on these learnings, we present a set of recommendations for strengthening Roma employment inclusion:

- At local level, stakeholders should implement targeted plans with specialised NGOs and reinforce links to local labour markets. Companies are encouraged to improve job quality, adopt transparent diversity strategies and invest in training-and-employment programmes that provide both qualified workers and greater workforce diversity.
- National authorities should integrate proven targeted methodologies into active employment policies and ensure long-term funding. Their involvement as cofounders but also in the follow up of the programme is also key (this also applies to the local authorities).
- At EU level, sustained ESF+ investment, recognition of specialised NGOs as implementing bodies and support for networks for mutual learning, such as EU Roma, are essential.
- NGOs working on Roma employment are encouraged to further professionalise their services, ensuring a balanced approach between support for participants and services offered to employers, while maintaining a strong intercultural perspective.

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CONCLUSIONS

Labour market exclusion of Roma is not, at its core, a skills related issue. Instead, it is the matter of systematic discrimination that policies failed to meaningfully address. More specifically, the persistent gap between Roma and the general population in labour market participation, that has narrowed only modestly despite years of EU-level commitments and billions in Cohesion Policy investment, cannot be explained by educational deficits alone. Antigypsyism operates at every stage of the employment lifecycle: in the school classrooms that prepare children for the labour market, at the recruitment stage where prejudice routinely overrides qualification, in the workplace where Roma employees face unequal treatment and blocked career paths, and in the political arena where economic marginalisation translates into the erosion of civic voice. Without confronting this underlying reality adequate and meaningful labour market inclusion of Roma cannot be expected.

At the same time, the case for Roma employment inclusion has acquired a new urgency that goes beyond the imperatives of social justice. Europe's labour market is structurally tightening. The demographic contraction already visible in workforce statistics will intensify sharply over the coming decades, and no realistic combination of immigration, automation or productivity improvement will fully compensate for it. Roma, the EU's largest ethnic minority, with a markedly younger age profile than the majority population, represent the most significant untapped labour reserve within many Member States. The countries that continue to tolerate the conditions producing near-50% NEET rates among Roma youth are not simply failing a minority group; they are actively undermining their own economic resilience. This alignment between the economic interests of Member States and the rights-based case for Roma inclusion should, in principle, make the political argument for sustained investment considerably easier. In practice, it has not, which itself points to the depth of the problem: when economic self-interest is insufficient to override Antigypsyism in political decision-making, the structural nature of discrimination is confirmed rather than contested.

The most consequential shift in recent policy thinking has been the gradual, still incomplete, move away from framing Roma unemployment as a product of individual or community deficits. The older logic, which attributed low employment rates to a lack of motivation, a culture of welfare dependency, or an unwillingness to adapt to labour market norms, shaped a generation of activation measures that evaluated success by participation counts rather than by sustained employment outcomes. The evidence of their failure is now widely acknowledged in national strategic documents. What has not followed, in most Member States, is a commensurate shift in what actually gets funded and implemented. Recognising structural discrimination in strategy documents while continuing to invest primarily in supply-side training and activation programmes is a contradiction that no amount of improved framing can resolve. Until anti-discrimination enforcement is treated as a core employment policy instrument, and until public employment services develop the institutional capacity to address the demand-side barriers Roma workers face, the structural diagnosis will remain unmatched by structural remedies.

The inspiring practices examined in this report illuminate, what genuine structural change requires. None of them succeeded by applying a standardised activation formula more diligently than their predecessors. Each succeeded, to the extent that it did, by doing something that most policy instruments are not designed to do: treating the person as a whole individual embedded in a specific community context, and investing in the slow work of building trust, resolving practical barriers and mediating between Roma workers and institutions that were not designed with them in mind. The Romanian Health Mediation Programme worked because it embedded culturally competent professionals within the public health system rather than creating a parallel structure. The Acceder programme in Spain worked because it combined personalised employment pathways with sustained employer relationships and a methodology refined over more than two decades. The Tesco-ČvO partnership in Slovakia worked because an NGO with deep community roots met a corporation with leadership genuinely committed to values of social responsibility, inclusiveness and respect for diversity. The People and Castles programme worked because it generated genuine skills and social recognition in a context where participants could take pride in a visible, collective achievement. In each case, the intervention was grounded in a specific understanding of the people it was serving and the obstacles they actually faced.

An honest assessment of these approaches also requires acknowledging their limits: what they cannot achieve on their own. Even the most effective of them operates at a scale that is modest relative to the challenge. The People and Castles programme, despite its achievements, has not broken the cycle of discontinuous, project-funded employment that characterises most Roma labour market interventions: the gap between successive project cycles produces exactly the re-indebtedness and skill erosion that the programme seeks to overcome.

The Tesco–ČvO model remains dependent on the voluntary commitment of a single corporate partner and on the NGO's capacity to sustain accompaniment with inadequate systemic funding. These are not criticisms of the practices themselves; they are criticisms of the policy environment in which they operate. The lesson is not that promising practices are insufficient, but that their impact will remain contained until the surrounding system – public employment services, anti-discrimination enforcement, funding continuity, institutional recognition of civil society roles – is reformed to support rather than constrain them.

The trajectory of the Health Mediation Programme, from a civil society pilot in the 1990s to a legally recognised occupation financed from the national budget, offers the clearest model of what success looks like when it is measured not in project outputs but in institutional transformation. That trajectory took nearly three decades, required sustained advocacy by civil society, was nearly derailed by decentralisation, and remains incomplete. Its significance is not that it provides an easily replicable template, but that it demonstrates the direction of travel: from innovation to institution, from project-based delivery to structural integration, from parallel schemes to mainstream embedding. Acceder's influence on the 2023 Spanish Employment Law, which formally recognised Roma as a priority group, and its integration into Spain's first national Employment Plan for Roma, represents the same trajectory in a different national context. These are the benchmarks against which the sustainability of any employment inclusion practice should ultimately be assessed: not whether it has run for several project cycles, but whether it has changed something in the system that will persist after the funding ends.

Civil society organisations are not just useful partners in this process; they are its indispensable architects. The practices documented here were, without exception, initiated or critically shaped by civil society organisations with long-standing community relationships. These organisations possess something that public employment services and private employers generally do not: the trust of Roma communities accumulated over years of presence, and the knowledge of specific local circumstances that makes holistic support possible. Their role as monitors and critics of state action is equally essential. The gap between what national strategies commit to and what is actually implemented has been documented systematically through civil society monitoring, and without that monitoring the gap would be both larger and less visible. Maintaining this dual function – as service provider and as accountability mechanism – requires stable, multi-year funding that is structured as a public good rather than a competitive grant. Member States that channel civil society organisations into project-by-project tendering while simultaneously depending on their community knowledge and brokerage capacity are extracting value from an asset they are not sustaining.

The broader picture is one of a persistent, well-documented failure that is neither inevitable nor irreversible. The knowledge of what works exists. The economic case for acting on it has never been stronger. The political commitment, sustained over the time horizon necessary to produce structural change rather than project outputs, is what remains missing in most Member States. Closing that gap, between the evidence base accumulated by programmes like those examined here and the mainstream of employment and social inclusion policy, is crucial for achieving targets set up by the EU Roma Strategic Framework and national Roma strategies. It requires not the invention of new instruments but the political will to embed what already works into systems that are stable, adequately resourced and genuinely accountable for outcomes that matter: not participation counts, but jobs that last.

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