



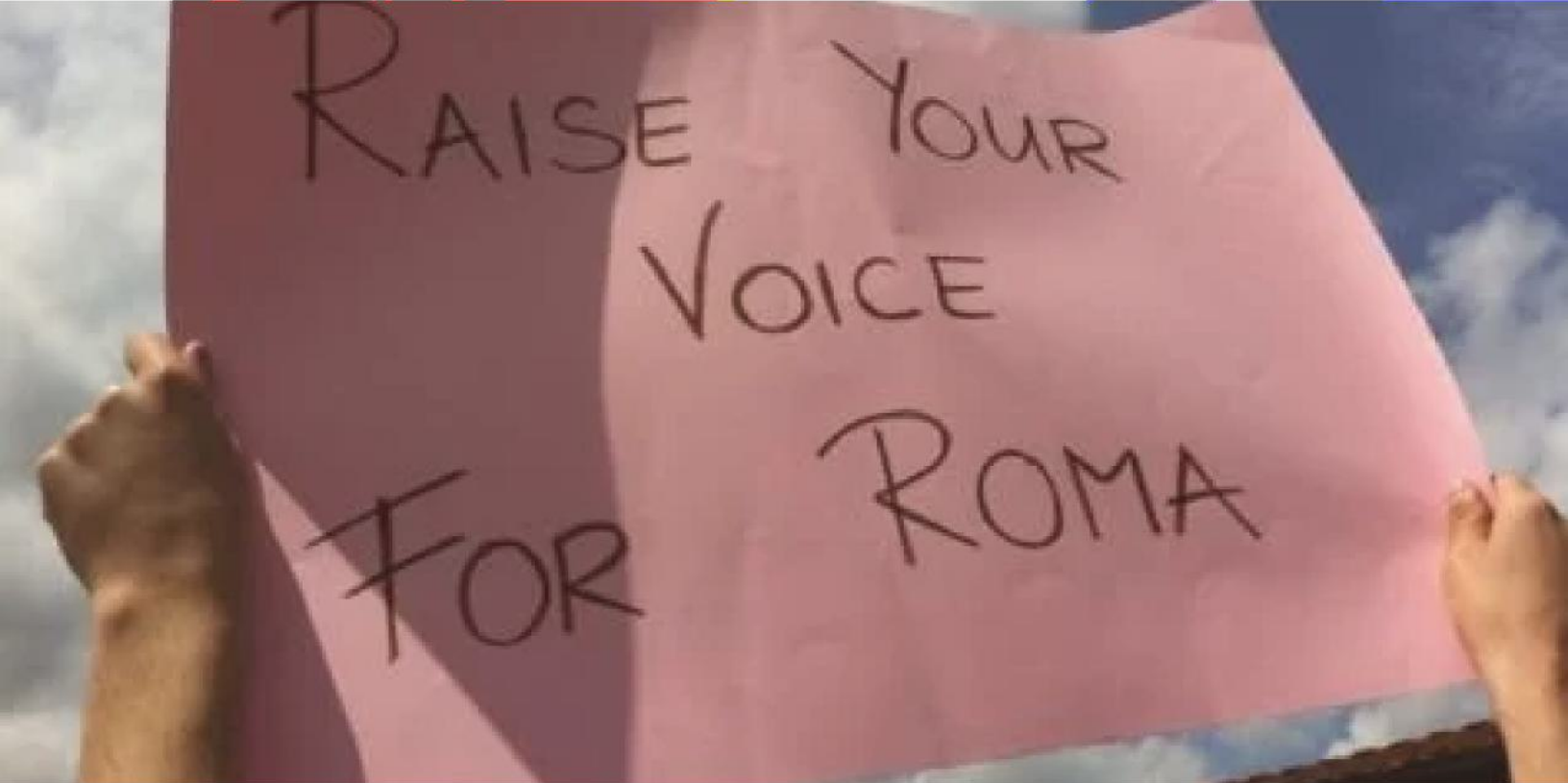
Photo Credit: Carmen Tofeni
Former grocery shop in the Hungarian countryside, now shuttered

Phiren Amenca

Public Service Access by Roma in
Hungary | 2024 Research Report



Phiren Amenca



Acknowledgements

This research was carried out on behalf of the Phiren Amencia International Network with the aim of contributing to a better understanding of Roma communities' access to public services in Hungary. Effective and targeted policy interventions require the active participation of Roma communities, as well as the continuous monitoring and evaluation of existing programs and Working paper not for publication opportunities. Following this approach, the research sought to uncover inequalities in access and identify potential intervention points.

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Executive Summary

The Phiren Amenca International Network¹ considered it important to conduct research on Roma communities' access to public services in Hungary. The first phase of the study, summarized in this working document, included desk research, focus groups, and fieldwork to provide insights into Roma access to key infrastructure, including housing, education, clean water, healthcare, financial services, and internet connectivity.

Phiren Amenca, in cooperation with Roma activists in Hungary who conducted the fieldwork, focused on public service provision in a selection of the most marginalized localities in Hungary, all of which are served by the *Felzárkózó települések* (FETE, or Catching Up) program, a national government initiative. Findings show that, while the challenges faced by Roma and non-Roma in these localities are similar, service provision differs due to complex issues related to systemic discrimination.² Participants in the field research generally seemed so accustomed to inadequate access to public services that they had come to expect - and passively accept - it, with the exception of healthcare, which they consistently identified as inadequate. The FETE program was found to face several implementation challenges, including administration of public services by government-contracted nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), lack of coordination between these NGOs and local authorities, unclear division of tasks with Roma self-governments, absence of accountability mechanisms, insufficient advocacy for improving conditions, and unclear review processes.

Service-specific research findings focused on education, healthcare, public transportation, access to electricity and water, internet connectivity, financial services, and community spaces. The research identified disparities in Roma communities' access to these domains across the board, all of which reinforce economic disadvantages. For example, with regard to education, low uptake of nursery education among Roma children (due to factors such as unemployment and a dearth of all-day nursery options) leads to insufficient preparation for compulsory education and ultimately, lower rates of college enrollment. Similarly, limited access to pediatricians and pharmacies in segregated settlements (as defined by the official census data) exacerbates the staggering health disparities between Roma and non-Roma communities, resulting in lower life expectancies and higher incidence of diseases such as cancer.³

Infrastructure challenges include inadequate or nonexistent public transportation, which hinders community access to vital services, including electricity and clean water. Limited internet connectivity in Roma communities affects citizens' abilities to access information and learn about opportunities for civic engagement. The research also identified lack of financial awareness and access to banking services as significant challenges, with a strong need for banks and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to provide information about state-subsidized grant programs. Furthermore, the lack of community spaces in Roma neighborhoods further reinforces the aforementioned challenges by hampering social interactions and access to information.

¹ [Phiren Amenca](#) is a network of Roma and non-Roma volunteers and volunteer service organizations working to create opportunities for education, dialogue, and engagement in the fight against stereotypes and racism.

² For the purposes of this research, we define systemic discrimination using the [United Nations Committee on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights definition](#): "legal rules, policies, practices or predominant cultural attitudes in either the public or private sector which create relative disadvantages for some groups, and privileges for other groups."

³ European Commission. (2014). [Roma Health Report](#): Health status of the Roma population. Data collection in the member states of the European Union.

Perhaps the most important conclusion is that all of these inequities combine and compound the difficulties faced by those most marginalized, manifesting in entrenched, difficult-to-address disadvantages. As a result, addressing key elements of provision that contribute to these disadvantages could have important positive effects on all the others.

The present report resulted in a number of recommendations for key stakeholders including activist groups and advocacy organizations, researchers, policymakers and local governments, and market-based service providers. For advocates, it is critical to put pressure on political parties to confront these issues. To ensure that the voices of groups with the least access to and capacity for advocacy are heard, advocacy groups should identify and formulate local needs and lobby for them in the right places. Stakeholders that include Roma politicians and activist groups should launch campaigns involving both local citizens and decision-makers to draw attention to the insufficient access to public services in marginalized communities and possible solutions. It is also necessary to raise awareness among the communities concerned, particularly of the services they should be receiving from their government but do not

For researchers, this report identifies recommendations for further research, findings from which could then be used to inform the development of more targeted, evidence-based policies. In a second iteration, a more in-depth research in a smaller subset of localities will zoom in on the specific elements that could be addressed to move the dial in favor of marginalized communities. Among the many topics that warrant more in-depth investigation are school segregation, sanitation, and clean water access.

For policymakers and local governments, a priority concern should be large scale reform of the healthcare system. More pharmacies, more providers in rural areas, anti-bias training for healthcare professionals, and education initiatives related to prevention are all interventions that could positively impact healthcare provision in Roma communities. Additionally, access to drinking water should be a fundamental right, but to ensure it, it will be necessary for the government to develop a subsidy system. Market-based service providers should ensure all services and payment options are fully accessible online. They should also look to provide public information and training on how to use (online) banks or fintech companies that offer digital financial services.

Introduction

Prior research has shown how structural discrimination places Roma in positions of relative powerlessness,⁴ excluded by the intersection of inequalities, including spatial, economic, social, political, environmental, and cultural. Power operates through social relationships within and between families, communities, and decision-makers and creates disincentives to the inclusion of those who lack it. Intersecting forms of disadvantage perpetuate intergenerational poverty and enforce the idea that the marginalization of certain groups is justified, since the roots of these disadvantages are often no longer visible.⁵

Following the political transition, Roma communities lost access to a number of public services that had previously been provided by the state, which led to their marginalization—both literally and figuratively. This has resulted in poverty and existential insecurity not only making their everyday lives more difficult but also undermining their ability to mobilize others for political change. As such, it can be said that inequality and deprivation contribute to the social subordination of Roma communities.

To examine how this lack of access to public services is manifested in Hungary, Phiren Amenca conducted thorough assessments of the government services provided to Roma communities, as well as the power dynamics that may facilitate and exacerbate discrepancies in the provision of these services. Resulting recommendations are intended to inform both Roma civil society organizations' (CSOs') petitions to government bodies and elected officials for non-discriminatory, dignified service provision, as well as municipalities', market-based service providers', and other statutory bodies' efforts to address such discrepancies. Working with a team of researchers led by Roma issues expert/researcher Gábor Daróczi, Phiren Amenca designed a three-stage research approach consisting of: 1) desk research, 2) qualitative research (through focus groups with the relevant communities), and 3) field research conducted in selected communities with a high population of Roma citizens. The scope of the third stage was informed by the desk research and focus group discussions, the findings of which allowed the researchers to narrow the focus of the research by identifying priority areas of interest related to public service provision. This approach also fosters long-term, effective strategies to address community inequities by giving Roma CSOs, municipalities, market-based service providers, and other statutory bodies the tools and data to leverage into comprehensive, cohesive, and convincing campaigns to advocate for equal access to government services.

This research study used as a foundation the Roma Political Minimum (RPM) of political and social policies establishing minimum standards in five key areas: political rights, cultural institutions, education, employment, and access to public services.⁶ The *Idetartozunk! (We belong here!)* Association, led by Roma civil rights activist Jenő Setét, announced the program to counter structural antigypsyism in preparation for the 2022 parliamentary elections. More than 100 Roma and non-Roma organizations have committed to supporting the RPM and its two primary goals. The first of these was to achieve a political paradigm shift away from basic welfare service provision to a more holistic focus on social justice considerations for Roma communities. The second goal was to set concrete demands to be fulfilled by decision-makers. The RPM was eventually endorsed by almost all parties taking part in the 2022 parliamentary elections.

⁴ Howard, J. and Vajda, V. (2017) [Navigating power and intersectionality to address inequality](#). IDS Working Paper, issue 504.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ The [Roma Political Minimum](#) (RPM), first launched in November 2021, is a series of policy proposals to advance Roma community needs and interests developed in collaboration with Roma community leaders and activists.

The RPM legislative demands would have an outsized impact on Roma communities, although their implementation would have spillover benefits for other communities as well. For example, the demands call for desegregating education and better quality education for Roma communities, shown repeatedly to be an intractable issue for Roma across Europe⁷; ensuring that Roma communities have access to the same infrastructure as non-Roma communities; employing more Roma individuals in the public sphere; improving the system of preferential minority electoral mandates; and providing state funding for Roma cultural institutions. These demands were formulated by the over 100 Roma CSOs who endorsed the RPM, but had not been rigorously researched. The present inquiry set out to find further evidence that would support these advocacy directions.

The research also contributes to the efforts of the Roma Civil Monitor,⁸ a pilot project spearheaded by the Central European University since 2017 along with civil society partners, including Phiren Amenca in Hungary in its latest iteration. The Roma Civil Monitor supports civil society in monitoring the implementation of national Roma integration strategies.⁹ It is implemented with the active participation of approximately 90 NGOs from 27 EU member states.

The objectives of the research, informed by Roma civil society partners and international experts, are ultimately twofold: 1) to better understand the implementation of government-sponsored efforts and how they have affected Roma communities and 2) to reinforce the principle that, regardless of which party wins an election, citizens have a right and responsibility to monitor service provision and hold decision-makers accountable for their promises, using evidence collected by the community.

Methodology

According to the experiences of members of the Phiren Amenca network—community leaders and activists—repeatedly confirmed during numerous professional meetings organized by Phiren Amenca, Roma political and civic participation can be effectively strengthened through initiatives that are directly based on community engagement. Such initiatives include joint data collection, small group discussions, the identification of local priorities, and the collective interpretation of results. Phiren Amenca's programs have shown that when Roma youth and local residents receive proper training and actively participate in these processes, it not only strengthens community self-organization but also lays the foundation for dialogue with decision-makers. Similar approaches in other communities have shown that when the perspectives of the poorest and most marginalized individuals are included in decision-making, it improves local accountability and fosters broader societal understanding, knowledge, and connection.

Drawing inspiration from the above and from many conversation with Phiren Amenca's network across Central and Eastern Europe, the present research study, which took place from April to November 2023, included three consecutive components that complemented and informed one another:

1) **Desk Research** - The research team collected and analyzed research spanning the last 20 years on the following topics:

⁷ Bernard Rorke (2021) [Antigypsyism in Hungary: the Gyöngyöspata case versus 'the people's sense of justice'](#); European Roma Rights Centre (2020) [Roma are Leading the Fight against Authoritarianism in Hungary](#)

⁸ The full title of the [pilot project](#) is 'Capacity building for Roma civil society and strengthening its involvement in the monitoring of national Roma integration strategies.'

⁹ The Roma Civil Monitor aims to enhance civil society monitoring in two key ways: 1) by developing the policy monitoring capacities of civil society actors, and 2) by supporting the preparation of high-quality, comprehensive periodic civil society monitoring reports.

- Roma identity and the share of the Roma minority within the Hungarian population,
- Education,
- Health,
- Spatial segregation and housing,
- Labor market and social exclusion,
- Political participation and representation, and
- Policies addressing Roma.

Sources included academic literature, reports from international bodies such as the European Commission, and other publicly available data, such as the national census, on the access of Roma to government-administered and other services such as healthcare, housing, education, financial, social, and digital (e.g., internet access).

2) **Focus Group Discussions** - The research team further explored the topics identified in the desk research through discussion questions examining how focus group participants felt about the challenges facing their communities and who (and which institutions) are most trusted by Roma citizens to solve these challenges. Across the three focus group discussions, 23 individuals participated, of whom 11 were women and 12 were men.

3) **Field Research** - The research team fielded a survey in 29 municipalities with a significantly higher-than-average proportion of Roma inhabitants, with the help of 16 field researchers trained in a three-day intensive course. The 29 municipalities represent approximately 10 percent of those covered by the FETE program, which includes 300 localities. The number was selected based on the capacities and resources available for research.

When selecting topics to include in the field research, the research team drew heavily on the focus group discussions. The team assumed that, in these topic areas, concrete data would demonstrate the form and extent to which Roma are disadvantaged in terms of access to and the provision of public services and infrastructure. The field research aimed to identify the continuing challenges Roma citizens face to accessing public services, adequate housing, and infrastructure in the selected areas, despite significant government investment, such as the Felzárkózó települések (FETE, or Catching Up Localities) program.¹⁰

In conducting the field research, the research team:

- Analyzed relevant documents (e.g., Municipal Equal Opportunities Plans,¹¹ FETE program diagnoses, and municipality websites);
- Observed and collated publicly available data to analyze access to public services in the area, such as the distance from the poorest part of the municipality to the nearest bus stop, availability of public transportation to essential public services (e.g., doctor, pharmacy, schools, nurseries), and proximity of other services that make everyday life easier (e.g., banks, ATMs, internet); and
- Held informal conversations with local Roma residents about the above topics.

When selecting the 29 participating municipalities, the researchers did not consider spatial or size delimitation, but rather their inclusion in the FETE program and their Roma population (minimum

¹⁰ [FETE](#) is the government's flagship social inclusion program, which “aims to rebuild the community, show a way out of poverty, and give the poorest people access to community, social, educational, and health services that were previously inaccessible to them.” Using statistical data, the program identified, mapped, and described in detail the 300 most marginalized communities in Hungary. In these communities, the government then initiated a number of complex integration projects focused on issues such as early childhood education, children’s services, housing, access to clean energy, and healthcare.

¹¹ More about the [local equal opportunities programs](#)

20 percent). The research assistants' local knowledge also informed the selection, although field researchers were not allowed to survey their localities of origin or where they currently live.

Summary of Desk Research Findings

The desk research allowed the researchers to identify gaps in service provision that could then serve as the basis for further research under the focus group and field-based components of the study. However, the desk research was not used to draw specific conclusions or conjecture about the future of Roma at the individual, community, or societal level. Rather, the purpose of the desk research was to provide an overview of relevant knowledge, based on the available material. The desk research process is also useful for identifying what data has not been collected - that is, where there are critical gaps in knowledge and evidence related to the Roma community.

Spatial Segregation and Housing

Spatial segregation, according to the 2009 Urban Development Manual,¹² occurs when the economic and social divides between different groups of people are reflected geographically. The Hungarian Central Statistical Office uses a map of 19 indicators, including education, housing, employment, size of territorial unit, and geographical boundaries to define segregated areas. Spatial segregation based on ethnicity and socioeconomic status is most frequent in the Northern Hungary and Northern Great Plain regions. The most recent fully verified census in Hungary (2011)¹³ identified 1,384 segregated areas across the country, including 84,401 homes and 276,244 inhabitants, of whom more than 30 percent were children. Segregation perpetuates inequalities in income, municipal infrastructure, and access to services.¹⁴ However, the desk research found that many existing studies fail to analyze the correlation between segregation and limited access to public resources.¹⁵

A report by the European Court of Auditors highlights the ongoing marginalization of the Roma population in the European Union (EU) and the significant challenges to accessing essential services that result.¹⁶ A separate, regional study based on a micro-region in southwest Hungary identified a growing tendency whereby entire settlements and groups of settlements become inhabited only by Roma families and people.¹⁷ These micro-regions face all the disadvantages caused by physical and social segregation (e.g., deep poverty, unemployment, no accessible high-level public services). Another study analyzing the socio-economic situation of the Roma minority found that segregated settlements are characterized by high levels of poverty, low levels of education, and limited access to basic services such as healthcare and housing.¹⁸ The study notes that Roma people in Hungary are also more likely to live in areas with inadequate infrastructure and limited job opportunities.

¹² Ladanyi, J. & Virág, T. (2009). A szociális és etnikai alapú lakóhelyi szegregáció változó formái Magyarországon a piacgazdaság átmeneti időszakában. Kritika: társadalomelméleti és kulturális lap 38 (7–8) 2–8.

¹³ Hungarian Central Statistical Office: [census data](#)

¹⁴ Cserti Csapó, T. (2008). [Területi-szociológiai jellemzés a magyarországi cigány népesség körében](#) In: Forray, R., K. (szerk.): [A magyarországi cigány/roma közösségek](#) pp. 75–109., PTE BTK Neveléstudományi Intézet Romológia és Nevelésszocio- lógia Tanszék, Pécs

¹⁵ Roma Civil Monitor. (2019). [Civil society monitoring report on implementation of the national Roma integration strategy in Hungary: Identifying blind spots in Roma inclusion policy](#). European Commission.

¹⁶ European Commission. (n.d.). [Roma equality, inclusion and participation in the EU](#)

¹⁷ Baranyi, B., G. Fekete, É., & Koncz, G. (2003): [A roma-szegregáció kutatásának területi szempontjai a halmozottan hátrányos helyzetű encsi és sellyei-siklósi kistérségekben](#), Kisebbségkutatás 12 (2): 344–362.

¹⁸ Cserti Csapó, Területi-szociológiai jellemzés a magyarországi cigány népesség körében.

According to the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, or KSH),¹⁹ the proportion of people living in overcrowded housing has decreased in Hungary, affecting 19.1 percent of the total population in 2019, down from 47.2 percent in 2010. However, according to KSH estimates from 2016, more than half of the Roma population - nearly 314,000 people - lived in overcrowded conditions, compared to 13 percent of non-Roma. Further, preliminary results from the 2022 census showed that nearly 98 percent of occupied dwellings nationwide were partially or fully equipped with basic amenities, such as electricity, heating, and running water.²⁰ However, in the Northern Hungary region, where most of the Roma live, the proportion of housing without basic amenities was twice the national average (4.4 percent vs. 2.2 percent) and more than four times that of central Hungary. Of those living in dwellings without basic sanitation, 46 percent were Roma (117,000 people), while only 2.8 percent were non-Roma (253,000 people).

The rising cost of housing, which makes it increasingly difficult for Hungarians to afford good living conditions across demographics, has compounded the disparities experienced by Roma communities described above. Housing affordability encompasses a variety of overlapping elements, including the costs of buying or renting a property, associated living expenses, household indebtedness, energy poverty, and eviction rates - raising the need for a comprehensive housing strategy to address these issues. Factors such as the economic and energy crises, the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, uncertain lending conditions, and the volatile cost of construction also have a significant impact on household expenditures and disproportionately impact the poorest households.²¹

Urbanization, due to industrial development driven by privatization, has pushed Roma to industrial areas with low-skilled jobs, perpetuating discrimination and poverty rather than supporting improved housing and living conditions. Further, the privatization of socialist enterprises left municipalities with poor housing stock, and government-sponsored integration efforts have only reinforced (socialist era-inspired) segregation policies and inadequate public service allocation. When the national government later tasked weak, under-resourced municipality structures with tackling residential segregation, they ultimately failed. After 2010, as central state involvement decreased, local councils were not able to manage the responsibilities that fell to them and, as a result, delegated many of their responsibilities to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Meanwhile, public workfare schemes left local authorities to distinguish between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor, exploiting marginalized people for cheap labor.²² Compounding this situation, state-led reorganization in the mid-2010s reduced local government budgets, further limiting their ability to address segregation and social problems.

As a result of these policies, research related to Roma and housing has shown that:

- Despite some positive developments in housing at the national level in the last decade, **the relative situation of those living in the poorest regions** (e.g., the northeastern counties of Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg and Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén) **has not improved**;²³
- Various housing programs announced by the government mainly targeted the middle class or above, meaning that **the poorest communities (including Roma) did not have**

¹⁹ Hungarian Central Statistical Office: [census data](#)

²⁰ The results of the 2022 census are still considered “preliminary,” and critics have raised concerns about its accuracy. According to the Hungarian Central Statistical Office, results are available for research purposes but not to the general public.

²¹ Karasz, K. & Daroczi, G. (2023). Addressing Housing Deprivation of Roma in Central and Eastern Europe. Unpublished manuscript, commissioned by Habitat for Humanity International.

²² Farkas, Zs.-Molnar, Gy. (2014). [A közfoglalkoztatási csapda](#). Magyar Szegénységellenes Halozat, Budapest.

²³ Karasz, K. & Daroczi, G. (2023). Addressing Housing Deprivation of Roma in Central and Eastern Europe. Forthcoming study, commissioned by Habitat for Humanity International

access to the resources provided, such as the grants and loan schemes subsidized by public funds with the involvement of private banks;²⁴ and

- Other housing support programs announced by the government primarily supported the construction, purchase, and renovation of owner-occupied housing, while **subsidized housing (including subsidized rental housing) was only provided by municipalities, NGOs, or churches - and on a much smaller scale.**

Education

Roma students in Hungary continue to face significant educational disadvantages, with lower levels of participation, completion, and educational attainment than their non-Roma peers. For example, while the overall completion rate for secondary education in Hungary is approximately 80 percent, the completion rate for Roma students is closer to 30 percent.²⁵ Further, there continues to be a significant achievement gap between Roma and non-Roma students with regard to literacy and numeracy skills. Roma students in Hungary have lower levels of proficiency in these areas than their non-Roma peers, which carries implications for their educational and employment prospects.²⁶

In some cases, these disparities can be traced to a lack of investment in equal education opportunities that has garnered international attention. A study on church schools in Hungary found that, in the studied locality, these institutions enroll a much lower rate of disadvantaged and Roma children than their mandate stipulates (despite receiving more state subsidies than public schools).²⁷ As a result of such inequities, the European Commission has directed Hungary to put an end to the discrimination of Roma children in education and initiated an ongoing infringement procedure urging the Hungarian government to bring its national laws on equal treatment and education in line with the Racial Equality Directive (Council Directive 2000/43/EC).²⁸

In March 2023, the European Court of Human Rights ruled in *Szoltcsán v. Hungary* that the education of Roma children in segregated schools breaches the prohibition of discrimination and that Hungary must develop a policy to end segregation in education. Despite these high-level procedures, which may result in the Hungarian government paying large fines to individuals or groups or losing EU funding due to sanctions, segregation in the education system is still very much a problem.

Health

A European Commission (EC) survey on the health of Roma people in EU member states revealed shocking disparities between Roma and non-Roma in Hungary.²⁹ Among the findings, Roma men have a life expectancy ten years shorter than non-Roma men; for women, the gap is 18 years. Infant mortality rates among Roma are higher, as is the prevalence of diseases like HIV, hepatitis, tuberculosis, and iron deficiency. Roma also face higher rates of smoking, illicit drug use, and alcohol consumption, with adolescents particularly affected. Despite high vaccination rates among Roma children, access to healthcare services remains limited, and according to the desk research, over half of Roma rarely use them at all. At least 18 percent of Roma report experiencing

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Papp, Z.A. & Neumann, E. (2021). [Education of Roma and Educational Resilience in Hungary](#). In: Mendes, M. M., Magano, O., Toma, S. (eds) *Social and Economic Vulnerability of Roma People*. Springer, Cham

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ercse, K. (2019). [Az egyházi fenntartású iskolák és a szelekció, szegregáció kapcsolata](#). Iskolakultúra, 29. évfolyam, 2019/7. szám.

²⁸ Council Directive [2000/43/EC](#) of 29 June 2000 implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin

²⁹ European Commission (2014).

discrimination by healthcare personnel in the past 12 months. Further, Roma suffer from depression, asthma, stomach ulcers, and cancer at higher rates than non-Roma.

Research conducted by the ERGO Network and published at the end of 2020³⁰, provides a detailed account of how the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the already disadvantaged situation of Roma communities. According to the report, many communities lacked access to basic necessities such as food and clean water, which made the pandemic period particularly dangerous. In the field of education, the absence of digital devices and internet access meant that a significant number of Roma children were excluded from distance learning, further deepening the educational divide. The economic impacts of the pandemic hit Roma people working in the informal sector especially hard, as they lost their income overnight. Poor housing conditions and limited access to healthcare also increased the risk of infection spread. The research highlights that Roma people were often unfairly blamed for spreading the virus, which further fueled prejudice and discrimination. According to the ERGO report, COVID-19 not only introduced new challenges but also amplified existing social and economic inequalities, clearly demonstrating that without targeted and comprehensive interventions, these communities will remain vulnerable.

Employment

There are many serious disparities regarding Roma and the labor market. Based on the most recent Central Statistical Office Labor Force Survey, the Roma population has lower than average representation in the labor market.³¹ Unemployment rates among Roma are significantly higher than the national average, and many Roma individuals work in low-paying or informal jobs.³² Two main reasons for these disparities are lower educational attainment and the spatial distribution of the Roma population in regions with fewer employment opportunities. Additionally, a significant proportion of Roma live in areas of the country with inadequate infrastructure and public transport, factors that add to the high unemployment rate. Data also revealed that the gender gap in employment rates among Roma people is significantly larger than for the rest of the population: 57.8 percent of Roma men ages 15-64 were employed in 2021, compared to 34.3 percent of women. Additionally, very few Roma young people obtain vocational qualifications; in 2021, more than 60 percent of Roma aged 18-24 left school early, which explains why the share of Roma not in employment, education, or training is more than four times higher than the rest of the population.

Several publications analyze the labor market discrimination and exclusion that Roma people experience in Hungary. One study concluded that programs targeting “Roma employment” were unable to successfully influence Roma employment levels.³³ However, perhaps most salient to this study’s focus on public services are the employment schemes introduced by the Hungarian government in 2011. These programs provide temporary jobs for long-term unemployed individuals, with Roma heavily represented among this population. Critics argue that these schemes trap individuals by failing to reintegrate them into the primary labor market, obstructing job-seeking efforts, paying well below the minimum wage, and neglecting to enhance workers’ skills, thereby keeping so-called “public workers” in substandard living conditions in the most marginalized communities with the lowest levels of public service support.³⁴

³⁰ The Impact of COVID-19 on Roma Communities in the European Union and the Western Balkans: Survey, ERGO Network, December 2020.

³¹ Data of the [Central Statistical Office](#)

³² Bernát, A. (2014). [Leszakadóban: a romák társadalmi helyzete a mai Magyarországon](#) In: Kolosi, T.–Tóth, I. Gy. (szerk.): Társadalmi Riport 2014. pp. 246–264., Társi, Budapest

³³ Fleck, G. & Messing, V. (2010). [Transformations of Roma employment policies](#). In: Lovász, A. & Telegdy, Á. (eds.): The Hungarian Labour Market 2010: Review and Analysis pp. 83–98., Institute of Economics, HAS – National Employment Foundation, Budapest.

³⁴ Farkas, Z. & Molnar, G. (2014). [A közfoglalkoztatási csapda](#). Magyar Szegénységellenes Hálózat, Budapest.

Desk Research Conclusions

The Roma minority in Hungary continues to face significant challenges due to systemic marginalization and segregation. Politicians have been unable to effectively address issues such as poverty; discrimination; and unequal access to education, housing, and employment opportunities for the Roma community, most often because policies stress integration over inclusion - a failure highlighted by the European Parliament in a seminal report on the matter.³⁵ Further, the Roma Civil Monitor has found that a failure to identify and mitigate corruption has negatively impacted Roma inclusion policies and programs, including those funded by the EU. Its 2019 report cites numerous examples of corruption involving Roma-targeted projects. As a result, inequities have worsened rather than improved, in spite of government “investments.”³⁶

Summary of Focus Group Findings

The researchers conducted focus group interviews with 23 people who identify as Roma in May and June 2023. The participants represented a gender balance of women and men, geographic diversity, and different Roma groups. To guide the focus groups, the researchers created a questionnaire and discussion protocol using Mentimeter. The first focus group, organized in-person in a segregated settlement in northeastern Hungary, comprised four men and four women, including three youth (18-25 years old). A second group, held in-person in central Hungary, also comprised four men and four women (two youth). The third group, held online, comprised three women and four men from various locations. The third group included well-known Roma individuals active in shaping programs and public policy events that affect Roma communities at the local and national levels.

The researchers asked focus group participants to discuss the following:

- Their perceptions of their access to information (and media consumption), as well as their freedoms of press, expression, and education;
- Their attitudes toward public servants, politicians, and activists;
- Their attitudes toward various organizations and groups which claim to advocate for Roma interests (e.g., NGOs, government bodies); and
- Their levels of satisfaction with the infrastructure in their municipality (or, in the case of the third group, their home villages).

The researchers also asked for respondents’ opinions on progress toward improving the overall situation of Roma in Hungary and which areas continue to pose the biggest challenges. Key findings are included below, organized by theme.

Access to Information:

- Roma communities rely heavily on the internet for information, and internet subscriptions are prioritized in family budgets above many other expenses. Many individuals have a personal internet-connected device.
- Almost all respondents have their own Facebook account through which they follow news. Facebook and its affiliated services (e.g., Messenger) are the preferred

³⁵ Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs. (2020). [Report on the implementation of National Roma Integration Strategies: combating negative attitudes towards people with Romani background in Europe](#). European Parliament.

³⁶ Roma Civil Monitor. (2019). [Civil society monitoring report on implementation of the national Roma integration strategy in Hungary: Identifying blind spots in Roma inclusion policy](#). European Commission.

communication channels. When asked whether “everyone has Facebook,” one participant responded, “Well, you can’t do anything without it these days.”

Perceived Freedoms:

- The Roma voice is perceived to be “weaker” than that of the non-Roma, and while focus group participants generally felt that they are free to express themselves, they agreed that their opinions are “inconsequential.” According to one participant, “the opinion of a Gypsy will not interest anyone, to be honest.” Another noted, “The word of a Hungarian and the word of a Gypsy is heaven and earth. What the Hungarian says is the right thing. And the Gypsy is oppressed, and it is not even clear to daylight what he says.”
- While Roma are, in principle, free to pursue education, in practice, the availability or lack of funding ultimately determines who can continue their education.

Trust in Institutions and Figures:

- Respondents expressed concerns about the state of democracy, rule of law, and corruption. Recent political events. Recent legislation that is perceived to limit democratic discourse confirms the belief among those who are most marginalized that they do not and cannot play a role in political space.
- Trust in political actors (e.g., political activists) and parties is extremely low. According to one participant, politicians are “all corrupt and always abusing their power.” Another stated that “most of them just play for their own pockets and don’t care what happens to the poor people.”
- Likewise, Roma have low levels of trust in public institutions, generally speaking. NGOs and churches (those conducting social or relief work) are most trusted.
- The focus group participants were very familiar with official Roma representative bodies (e.g., local, county, and national Roma Minority Self-Government), although they do not trust them at all. Exceptions were participants with personal, friendly relationships with the local Minority Self Government (MSG) or its members. However, the same cannot be said for the National Roma Minority Self-Government (NRMSG) - even if they knew members of the NRMSG personally, the participants still did not trust the institution.

Community Challenges:

- Focus group respondents described challenges in their specific communities related to material conditions, unemployment, poverty, and the health sector. It is difficult to find someone without a negative personal or first-hand experience with the health system.
- Participants were aware of the state of the infrastructure in their communities but less aware of the long-term problems they face as a result of poor access to public services (e.g., impacts on education, employment, and housing outcomes).
- Almost all participants reported a lack of access to otherwise publicly available community spaces (e.g., local community centers, cultural houses, libraries). They also reported a dearth of organized community events. This is especially important in places where many public services (e.g., doctor, nursery, kindergarten, school) are not existent or unavailable. When asked about the cultural facility in the village, one participant shared that “This [meeting] is the first time I have seen it from the inside,” despite the fact that it was inaugurated the previous year. Regarding what takes place there, the response was, “Nothing. The old folks had a day for elderly people, and the mayor and his buddies came here to party.”

The focus groups also revealed that the people most affected by poverty are most interested in public services that could have a direct and immediate impact on their lives. Longer-term plans, programs, and events with an indirect impact are of little interest. In general, the focus group

participants living in segregated environments are enthusiastic about meeting people who want to listen to them and have meaningful conversations with them. They regularly feel that their voice, their words, and their lives do not matter, and any experience to the contrary makes a notable difference in their lives.

Field Research

Background

The Hungarian government's FETE program and its participating localities served as the starting point for the field research described below, which aimed to examine whether and how Roma citizens are accessing public services and identify the continuing challenges they face in doing so, despite government initiatives like FETE. In summer 2023 Phiren Amenca and the lead researcher, selected and trained 20 Roma research assistants to carry out field research in select municipalities. The research assistants, who were Roma themselves, had local knowledge of and were accepted in Roma communities, and had some baseline knowledge of research methods. The researchers each chose one or two FETE localities³⁷ and through document analysis and sample-based observation in these areas, conducted inquiries into the access of Roma citizens to public services. The researchers surveyed 29 municipalities, illustrated in Figure 1 below:³⁸

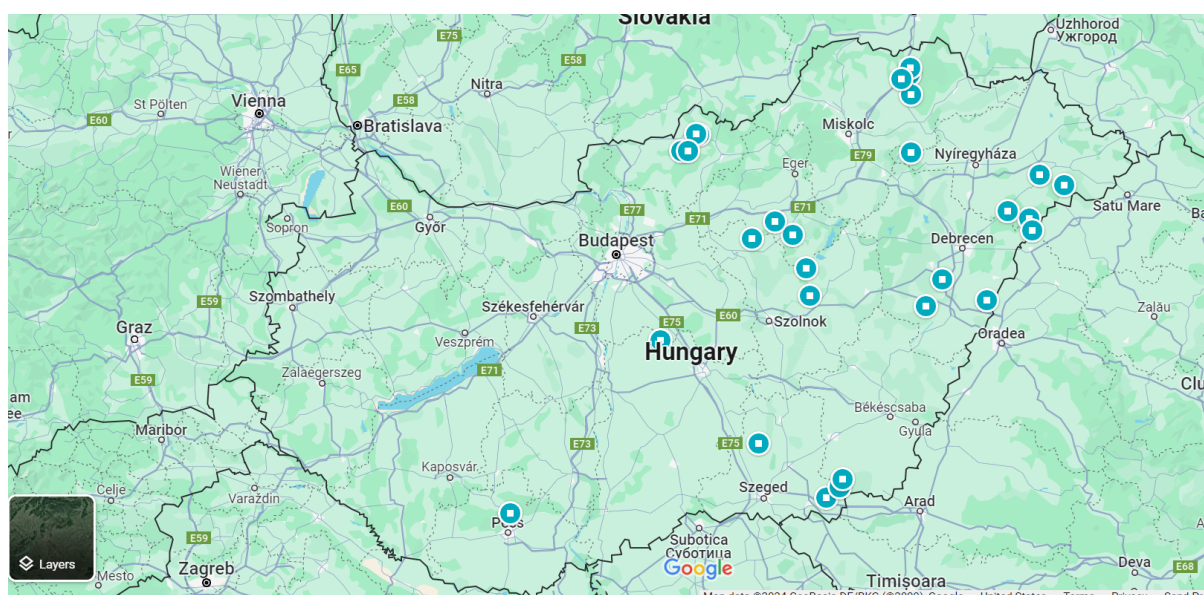


Figure 1: Municipalities surveyed by field researchers³⁹

Most of the aforementioned municipalities are located in two regions: the Northern Great Plain and Northern Hungary; both are among the least developed regions in the EU.⁴⁰ As a result, they could

³⁷ While the FETE program mapped whole localities, this field research went deeper, looking at the areas within localities that are inhabited by Roma communities. This is not statistically relevant but does provide a snapshot of the situation in a number of localities.

³⁸ Municipalities included in the research were: Átány, Baks, Bojt, Boldogközfalu, Csanádalberti, Göncruszka, Hajdúszovát, Hodász, Karancsság, Királyhegyes, Kömlő, Nagyecsed, Nagyér, Nagylóc, Novajdrány, Nyírbétek, Nyírmihálydi, Penészlek, Pocsaj, Rimóc, Sáp, Szalmatercs, Tarnabod, Tarnaörs, Tatárszentgyörgy, Tiszabő, Tiszabura, Tiszadada, and Vilmány.

³⁹ [Google maps](#)

⁴⁰ In the EU, regions are divided into development categories under the policy of Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion. Gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, employment, and education are among the factors that play a role in determining development categories.

benefit from Cohesion Policy support, structural funds, and other development resources from the EU to help their economic and social development. However, the field researchers were unable to identify any significant EU-funded projects in the region besides the FETE program.

Due to resource limitations, the research only covered a small proportion of the 300 municipalities included in the FETE program. Further, varying local conditions did not allow for meaningful comparisons of public service provisions (or lack thereof) between the municipalities. The field researchers did not have a specific questionnaire or protocol to use with local residents, but they were guided by research questions and set topic areas. Each wrote a report describing the situation in their chosen locality (or localities), addressing the topics described above. In doing so, they attempted to identify general trends in the selected areas, as well as the most salient issues for Roma communities and/or the areas in which Roma access to services was markedly different from that of the general population (e.g., paved roads, access to electricity, access to water). When possible, the researchers also aimed to make recommendations for future civil society or policy initiatives.

General Findings

According to our experiences, the issues facing Roma communities revealed that both Roma and non-Roma residents of FETE localities share many of the same challenges. However, the service provision to Roma differs because of complex intersectional challenges related to systemic discrimination. Still, the field research respondents did not report their access to public services to be a primary challenge; rather, they seemed to have accepted what the researchers consider to be the inadequate provision of services. One exception, however, is respondents' perceptions of their access to healthcare, which remains a high priority issue.

According to the field research, the FETE program faces a number of implementation challenges, the most important of which are:

- Although the FETE program's documents state otherwise, in reality, implementing organizations (almost invariably churches or faith-based bodies) administer public services, and they often do not coordinate with local elected authorities and institutions to do so;
- The selection and advance screening of these implementing organizations is not and has never been based on transparent parameters;
- The division of tasks and communication levels between the FETE program and the national or local Roma self-governments are unclear or non-existent (a major problem since Roma self-governments are the mandated elected bodies of Roma citizens);
- The FETE program does not have a watchdog function or other accountability mechanism;
- The program lacks an advocacy function to improve housing conditions for those most affected by poverty (e.g., it was unable to advocate for expanded access to a government-sponsored housing loan program or include social rental housing programs in state-subsidized schemes); and
- It is unclear whether the program is regularly reviewed; if so, reports of the review(s) are not published.

Service-Specific Findings

Education:

Uptake of nursery education by Roma, especially that which is not mandated by law, is very low. In southern Hungary, where a significant Roma minority lives mostly separated “over the cow’s field,”

researchers observed: “According to the FETE data, the nursery has seven creche⁴¹ enrollments, and even out of this small number, there are only two enrollments from disadvantaged groups. Considering that according to the FETE information, there are 417 inhabitants of Roma origin in the municipality, it can be clearly concluded that the nursery education for under 3-year-olds is not or only insignificantly used by Roma or disadvantaged people.”

Since at least one parent (typically the mother) is at home due to unemployment or with a younger child, the vast majority of children are taken home after lunch from the government-mandated nursery, which is supposed to keep them until the afternoon. As a result, they benefit far less from nursery education and development than their peers who are at a nursery all day (whose parents may both be employed, for example). This phenomenon is one reason Roma children are less prepared for school environments when, at age 6, they enter compulsory education.

Healthcare:

Access to a pediatrician is crucial for routine procedures such as vaccination, as well as issues related to infant and child nutrition and illnesses resulting from resource deprivation. However, most of the segregated settlements surveyed in this research are in districts without a permanent general practitioner or pediatrician. In one village, researchers observed that “The pediatrician visits the village every two weeks, together with the pediatric nurse midwife service. During this time, in the mornings, parents have a total of two hours to take their sick children to the pediatrician for an examination.” A similar situation could be found in all but two of the other municipalities included in this study.

In 2020, there were approximately 2,300 public pharmacies with 680 branches in Hungary, amounting to nearly 3,000 units. These units are complemented by more than 200 hand dispensaries and 180 institutional outlets. However, according to field research observations, most settlements with a higher percentage of Roma population did not have a pharmacy within them, forcing people to visit the nearest town to access a pharmacy (illustrated in Figures 2 and 3).

Gyógyszertár nélküli települések

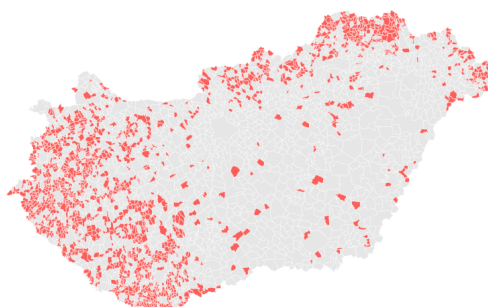
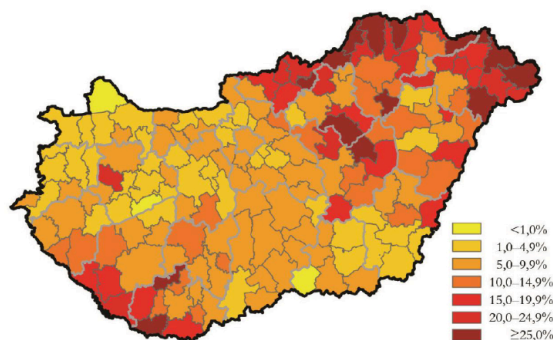


Figure 2: Settlements without a pharmacy

⁴¹ A nursery where babies and young children are cared for during the work day.

A roma népesség aránya a járásokban a DE-felmérés (2010–13) alapján



Forrás: Péntes János - Tátrai Patrik - Pásztor István Zoltán, Területi Statisztika, 2018. január

Figure 3: Percentage of Roma population by district (2010-13)

Infrastructure:

Public transportation, as the primary means of accessing additional public services, has only started to develop or improve in recent years and has not yet had an impact on the municipalities studied (with few exceptions); as such, respondents did not report any improvements in public transport. In some localities, there was no reliable or sufficiently frequent public transportation option to the nearest larger locality, where vital public services are often located.

In one of the few fully segregated settlements in northeast Hungary (Tiszabő), accessibility of public transport is crucial. According to the framework of the FETE program, a church provides educational services starting at birth, and early childhood education continues up to technical vocational schooling at age 18. According to research observations, *"Only one bus a day comes and goes to Kunhegyes, where the district office is. Many people are not able to go to the central government office⁴² to do business. Those who do go there drive (in those rare cases they have a car) or hire a driver, which is extremely expensive. The municipality does not provide any support for that, but the Hungarian Maltese Charity Service usually takes people."*

Access to Electricity

In the majority of the surveyed settlements, Roma-occupied houses typically have electricity, although in many cases it is provided by a prepaid electric meter. Feedback suggests that the prepaid meter prevents families from accumulating debt and rolling it over for years. However, when a household nears the end of its purchased amount of electricity, the device beeps loudly and continuously. This noise not only significantly interferes with any activity that requires concentration (such as children's studies), but also broadcasts the family's current financial situation. Further, topping up the meter often requires visiting another municipality. In Nagylóc, when total curfew was introduced during the worst period of the COVID-19 pandemic, several heads of household were fined 50,000 HUF (approximately USD 125) for leaving their houses to attend to this matter during the lockdown.

Access to Water

The field research indicates that 5-10 percent of people living in Roma settlements - tens of thousands of people total - face challenges to accessing drinking water on a daily basis. Meanwhile, in Hungary as a whole, the proportion of residential properties with access to drinking water

⁴² The government office provides high level public services to citizens and businesses. It exercises the powers of an administrative authority, issuing permits and making decisions on issues that directly affect citizens (e.g., construction, guardianship, taxation).

reaches 98 percent. The reasons for this disparity are complex and varied: in some places there is piped water, but it is stopped during times of drought; in others, pipes are old and have not been replaced, meaning running water is not functionally available. Third, due to an inability to pay the necessary taxes, people sometimes find their water supply cut off with little advance notice. According to the leader of the Social Parcel Service (Szociális Csomagküldő Szolgálat, or SZOCSOMA),⁴³ a grassroots organization focused on humanitarian support to Roma, *"While water experts are proudly stating that in 98 percent of the country's territory the water network is available and it sounds good indeed, no one thinks about how many people are covered by the remaining 2 per cent, and who they actually are. This sounds like a very small number, but they are 200,000 Hungarian citizens, almost all of them Roma, living in generational poverty. We have no idea what torture they have to go through every day. Let's face it, we have left them in the Middle Ages, while society's expectations of them are also adjusted to the modern age."*

Internet Connectivity and Other Services

Roma communities tend to be left behind in the digital revolution due to a lack of sources of and, most importantly, inability to finance internet access. In Tiszabő, *"they mainly use the internet from their phones. Only 70 percent of the population has internet access, although intermittently. It is common for the internet to be tied up due to missed payments."* The situation in Tatárszentgyörgy was not much better: *"Internet access was almost non-existent in any of the houses, but there is an open Wi-Fi network in front of the Community Centre, which locals can connect to. In the library, computer internet access is no longer available, as the computers are outdated, but the lady working there will help anyone who asks on her own computer, and you can also use your own devices by connecting to the Wi-fi."*

The lack of or limited access to the internet in Hodász often causes information deficits that can lead to missed opportunities for civic involvement in local government processes. For example, an advertisement on the municipality's website announces an upcoming change to municipal planning about which a virtual public forum was to be organized. Governmental and legal information available on the internet would help Roma citizens learn about the rights and opportunities available to them, but without reliable access, this is not possible.

Financial awareness and access to banking services also pose a consistent challenge. Although many Roma families living in extreme poverty and in settlements could be eligible for state-subsidized grant programs (such as the Family Homebuyer Allowance program), researchers could not find evidence of banks, NGOs, churches, or FETE program initiatives with services available to inform people about such programs or guide them through the bureaucratic steps to access them. Researchers also found that, in most of the surveyed villages, there is no bank or ATM; in some cases, there was one ATM, but both services were available only in the largest three settlements.

Echoing the focus group findings, through discussions with community members, research assistants found that citizens are sorely lacking community spaces in their neighborhoods where they can meet, interact with each other, and access information. All too often, researchers heard that previously available community spaces were either permanently shut because the municipality was not able to resource or maintain them or worse, misused (for example, as storage spaces).

⁴³ More information can be found at their [website](#).

Recommendations

The research conducted under this three-part study identified entrenched disparities in access to public services for Roma communities. These disparities are reinforced and perpetuated by a longstanding history of marginalization and segregation. While the general conclusions are both informative and shocking - shedding light on major problems with access to basic amenities such as electricity and water - this research also demonstrates how lack of access to one public service creates obstacles to accessing others, compounding and perpetuating marginalization for great numbers of Hungarian citizens.

While this research does not make a statistical case for structural deprivation, it does highlight particular cases where, in spite of considerable government investment, those living on the margins of society are hampered by a host of invisible obstacles (not of their own making) and are unable to break the cycle of poverty that afflicts generations of Roma families. It is ultimately incumbent upon policy- and decision-makers to develop comprehensive strategies to address these challenges, intensify Roma inclusion efforts, involve Roma communities in policy design, and improve data collection to effectively address the specific needs of the Roma population.

General Recommendations

Policy Change:

Because policy- and decision-makers are not currently addressing disproportionate and unfair access to public services, it is critical for advocates to put pressure on political parties to confront these issues. The community challenges highlighted throughout this report also warrant further research, findings from which could then be used to inform the development of more targeted, evidence-based policies. For example, there is very little information available on the FETE program; given that it is the largest-ever Roma-concerned support program in Hungary's history, and it faces a variety of very serious implementation challenges, there should be more information publicly available that could drive positive change.

Awareness and Advocacy:

To ensure that the voices of groups with the least access to and capacity for advocacy are heard, it is essential to have advocacy groups (e.g., Local Action Groups) that can identify and formulate local needs and lobby for them in the right places. Affected parties, such as Roma politicians or activist groups, should launch campaigns involving both local citizens and decision-makers in order to draw attention to the issue of unfair access to public services in marginalized communities and possible solutions. It is also necessary to raise awareness among the communities concerned, particularly of the services they should expect to receive from their government (e.g., what their service options are and how to access them). For example, all-day kindergarten provision, electricity provision, and connectivity issues could each be the subject of an awareness campaign.

The many disadvantages arising from insufficient or poorly-organized service provision (e.g., how the availability of public transportation inhibits access to electricity or healthcare services) are particularly important and could also be the subject of priority campaigns.

Service-Specific Recommendations

Education: The few preexisting public services that are available could be more effectively used, even in FETE municipalities. The vast majority of respondents in this study do not currently use available services, such as all-day kindergartens - the importance of which should be highlighted in the context of campaign(s) targeting Roma parents. In a few select FETE municipalities, more extensive research is needed on the topic of education, specifically examining whether the FETE program is combatting school segregation or preserving it.

Healthcare: A key concern highlighted by participants in the focus groups and field research is access to healthcare, including primary care and pharmacies. The research revealed systemic problems inherent to the healthcare system for which the implementation of any piecemeal recommendations would be inadequate. However, based on this research study, healthcare is also an area in which real, concerted efforts on the part of the government to improve service delivery would have a direct and immediate impact on quality of life. More pharmacies, more pediatricians in the countryside, anti-bias training for healthcare professionals, and education initiatives related to disease prevention opportunities and services are all interventions that could positively impact healthcare provision in Roma communities.

Market-Based and Financial Services: These findings also suggest the need for feedback to market-based public service providers (e.g., the national electricity company) regarding improvements to their services that would enable them to more effectively meet the needs of communities that are most marginalized by a lack of access. For example, all services and payment options should be fully accessible online. For those individuals and families with few financial resources, it would be beneficial to provide information and training on how to use (online) banks or fintech companies that offer digital financial services (from Hungary's biggest bank OTP to Revolut to Wise), which can save them time and money.

Connectivity: This study has reinforced the importance of free, affordable internet access for people living in extreme poverty. The internet is the only information tool that is also key to equal opportunities and economic development. It is also critical for informing people of their opportunities for civic engagement and participation in local political processes. Without such opportunities, it is very difficult for Roma to make their voices heard.

Sanitation and Water: Sewage and land pollution in these communities is not well-researched and was not included in this study for capacity reasons. However, targeted research on this topic would be critical to inform future initiatives. Further, access to drinking water should be a primary concern in Hungary today in order to drastically improve the quality of life of people living in segregated environments. Access to drinking water should be a fundamental right, but to ensure it, it will be necessary for the government to develop a subsidy system that follows the logic of 'utility subsidies' (albeit in a more efficient and fairer way).

Conclusion

As reported in the 2019 Hungarian Roma Civil Monitor,⁴⁴ “In many places in Hungary, public services – especially social, health care and education services – operate at such a low capacity that they cannot meet the envisioned social inclusion/integration objectives.” However, the 2019 report only details gaps in child protection services, which - while certainly salient to the current Hungarian context and very severe - does not paint a complete picture of the inequities in public services experienced by Roma communities. This (and associated research in the future) seeks to redress that balance.⁴⁵

Despite important gains in Roma representation in Hungarian parliament and advocacy organizations that would suggest progress, these gains do not necessarily translate to improvements in service delivery, primarily due to entrenched discrimination and structural antigypsyism. These obstacles can only be addressed through thoughtful interventions that include the participation of citizens living in these marginalized spaces. These interventions should be led by the government and supported by transparent, adequate investment. Ultimately, the findings of this research study beg for concerted work by citizens, civil society organizations, and decision makers to address these challenges and work to level the playing field for all citizens.

Phiren Amenca is planning further research to investigate the details of public service provision, especially in the area of public services for children. This will inform locality-specific recommendations, to be developed and implemented in collaboration with municipal leaders. It will also include work with politicians, including Roma political actors (e.g., members of parliament), to highlight the lack of service provision and advocate for substantive change.

⁴⁴ Roma Civil Monitor. (2019). [Civil society monitoring report on implementation of the national Roma integration strategy in Hungary: Identifying blind spots in Roma inclusion policy](#). European Commission.

⁴⁵ The research will also contribute to the important work of the Roma Civil Monitor, with the next edition due to be published after 2025.



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2024