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Framing education policies and transitions of Roma students in Europe

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ABSTRACT
The aim of this article is to identify the contexts and conditions that allow for successful education transitions and opportunities for the Roma minority in Europe. Thus far, transnational and national policies have failed to ensure Roma inclusion and education equality, even though some progress is visible. Using a combination of policy analysis and interviews with NGO and European Union actors, University academics and Roma students, the article examines the key contexts that frame education policies and create the necessary conditions for education transitions. It identifies the problems and challenges within the contemporary EU education policy frameworks and highlights the tensions between political rhetoric and policy commitments that are visible at national, transnational, and local levels. In addition, through a focus on individual student experiences, the article captures the lived reality of Roma students who have managed their education transitions with success.

KEYWORDS
Education policy; education transitions; Roma minority; European Union

Introduction
School transitions and early school leaving have been identified as problematic for young people in Europe and directly linked to difficulties in entering the labour market, poverty, and eventually social exclusion. Even though there have been steady improvements over the last 10 years, the early school leaving rate across the European Union in 2017 was 10.6% of 18–24 year old young people having left education with at most lower secondary education (Eurostat 2018).¹

The reduction of early school leaving is one of the headline targets in the Europe 2020 Strategy (European Commission 2010). The European Commission and Council of the EU have since 2010 agreed on actions and policies to tackle problematic school transitions as part of the Education & Training 2020 agenda, and sought to raise knowledge about effective ways to address this problem.² The various Commission and Council reports acknowledge that early school leaving is linked to young people’s disadvantaged backgrounds and those with a public care background, but also vulnerabilities that come
with special education needs and disabilities (Council of the European Union 2015; European Commission 2013).

Research has shown that the interrupted education trajectories of disadvantaged students are caused by a combination of complex processes and circumstances that reduce the capacity of young people to attend school, or to consider transitions within the education system. Such circumstances involve often cumulative problems of poverty, mental health, unstable family conditions, and sometimes substance abuse, which make young students particularly vulnerable to dropping out of school, or attending with few possibilities to take advantage of opportunities for further education (Biggart, Furlong, and Cartmel 2008; Lavrijsen and Nicaise 2015). When these circumstances are combined with the particular characteristics of school systems, welfare regimes, local labour markets and social protection arrangements, the literature observes varying degrees of difficulty for young people, and a different rate of early school leaving in different European contexts (Cabus and De Witte 2016; European Commission 2013; Gillies and Mifsud 2016; Lundahl et al. 2017).

In addition, disadvantaged students of Roma background face discrimination in school that leads towards high absenteeism and alienation, that often contributes to early school leaving (Eurofound 2016). Roma young people aged 16–24 have higher rates of early school leaving than the rest of the population in almost all European countries with a significant Roma minority, with about two thirds of them not in work, education or training (FRA 2018). Even amongst the countries where school attendance of Roma is high, this often takes place in schools of poor quality, with about 18% of Roma 6–24 years of age attending an educational level lower than that corresponding to their age, and often (ranging from 4% to 29%) in segregated schools or classrooms (FRA 2016).

Against this picture of poor education trajectories, there are Roma students who have managed to succeed against the odds in completing upper secondary education and entered University. Increasingly, there is research that identifies the mechanisms and conditions for success of disadvantaged students (see for example, Beremenyi and Carrasco 2015; Gkofa 2017; Kende 2007). These studies point to the significance of: inclusive education policies and discourses at national and local level, school systems that offer educational pathways to disadvantaged students, support, mentoring and career guidance at school, good family relations with school and peer help in academic engagement, as well as well-being of young people (Schnell, Keskiner, and Crul 2013).

Drawing on existing research on the governance of education trajectories and the factors that facilitate inclusion and progression within school systems, this article aims to identify the frameworks and conditions to be considered in cross-national contexts in studies of education transitions and opportunities for the Roma minority.

The article examines education transitions from two perspectives. First, a policy and governance perspective arising from: the European Union and the EU’s Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA); and, selected Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) that support Roma education. Second, it includes an analysis of the experiences of successful Roma students and their lecturers in the Central European University (CEU) in Hungary. These perspectives are examined through the European Union Roma inclusion policy frame against which policy actions are taken in several countries. In particular, the article addresses the following questions:
(a) How do policy and NGO actors view the governance of Roma inclusion within EU education policy; and, what are the problems associated with the effective implementation of change in this field?
(b) What are the major barriers these actors identify in improving education progression of Roma students?
(c) How do successful Roma students and their lecturers describe the institutional conditions and personal circumstances necessary for schooling success and transition to university?

These questions bring together the macro level discussions around the governance of education transitions, with the meso- and micro-levels of engagement with education policy structures from the perspective of policy making, policy practitioners, academic staff, and individual students. In addition, the article highlights the role of non-governmental organisations that have attracted little attention in education research in relation to their role as mediators between individuals and education institutions, as well as advocacy organisations that interact with national and transnational policy structures.

**Analytical approach**

Transitions within education are dynamic processes that result from multiple interactions of individuals with the institutions of the school, the family, local labour markets, and the welfare state, and are also framed by national and transnational policies that provide education opportunities and definitions of inclusion.

These interactions shape young people’s decisions and positions in their education careers. The study draws on Walther et al. (2015) who combine a governance perspective in the analysis of policy with a biographical perspective whereby students describe their education trajectories, and reflect on their experiences of family, school, support, and decision making in negotiating different levels of education participation. This approach connects institutional dimensions, to socio-economic and cultural resources and individual agency that construct particular education pathways as possible (Rosvall, Rönnlund, and Johansson 2018). At the macro level, the paper engages (i) with education and social policy developments at the level of the EU, and (ii) with the emerging literature that discusses the ‘Europeanisation’ of governance in education and inclusion – a term that suggests important education policy definitions taking place at the EU level, combined with a distinct approach to governance that is European in its construction (Alexiadou 2014; Richardson 2015). The term ‘governance’ here signals a blurring of boundaries between international and national arenas of policy production and the introduction of non-state actors, such as NGOs, in the making and mediation of policy (Normand 2010; Robertson 2010). It also suggests the steering of education systems through new mechanisms of policy such as the setting of benchmarks, peer reviews, exchange of information, and policy learning, that act as new modes of control of the direction, nature and content of education reforms (Lange and Alexiadou 2010).

Within the framework of the European Union, education and social policy are closely connected. Even though welfare in general, and education in particular, are organised by member states under the principle of subsidiarity, the EU promotes a social standards agenda, usually in non-binding instruments (such as recommendations, declarations,
communications, etc.). The development of social policies by the EU began around the late 1990s. It has been argued that it was the ‘multidimensional’ understanding of welfare of the Nordic countries that inspired a common approach to social policy and labour markets, and a stronger concern for social protection as a productive factor (De la Porte 2019; Kvist et al. 2015). The Lisbon Strategy that was launched in 2000, emphasised the combination of economic growth with an ‘inclusive knowledge-based economy’, and the European Semester introduced in 2011 continued in similar lines, although the pursuit of inclusion-ary social policies has been very much defined within the parameters of fiscal discipline (Dunlop and Radaelli 2016). In more recent developments such as the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) that was adopted in the form of a Declaration in 2017, the EU is seen to have been once more heavily influenced by the ‘Nordic model’ of welfare, bringing ‘social and labour market initiatives under one conceptual framework’ (De la Porte 2019, 5).

In such a model, high quality of welfare services is combined with active labour market policies that include significant tax-funded investment in education (Esping-Andersen 1990). Within the EU framework and the EPSR, the principles of equal opportunity and equal access to the labour market are mostly implemented through soft coordination, but are also supported by equality directives that are legally binding. In relation to the Roma minority, their education and transition to labour market, these are significant framings at the EU level, but the focus on Roma inclusion has at the same time been seen as worrying.

In particular, a number of authors are concerned with the ‘europeanisation of Roma’ issues (Kirova and Thorlakson 2015; Ram 2015) as a process that has institutionalised Roma inclusion into policy agendas, but is lacking the political commitment or implementation capacity to bring about positive change (Agarin 2014). Hence, this article highlights the political nature of education governance and the governance of inclusion, and the discursive resources available to the individual students who navigate the system. Ideas about inclusion, equality and education, used by policy actors are crucial in constituting the institutional structures that frame what is possible and what is desirable. Individual actors (in this case NGO members, EU staff, lecturers and students) are constrained by these structures and their histories, but also have considerable ‘space’ for the construction of meanings and for mediating these from one context to another (Schmidt 2010, 4).

The degree of engagement students have with the education process is a product of decisions and commitments based on pragmatic considerations, very much regulated by the ‘horizons of action’ students have available to them, given their location in particular socio-economic conditions and local circumstances (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997). So, in the analysis of the individual student interviews the article explores the conditions and contexts that have shaped the young peoples’ education trajectories given their particular economic, social and family resources and horizons of actions.

Roma inclusion in education: policy and governance

There are two important policy frames of reference for Roma inclusion in Europe. First, the Decade for Roma Inclusion, a policy initiative of cooperation amongst governments, NGOs and intergovernmental organisations, launched by the World Bank and UNDP, and aimed at combating discrimination against Roma in Europe. The Decade operated during 2005–
and has now concluded its work. Second, the European Union has taken on board the commitments of the Decade, but also the four priority areas of education, employment, health, and housing as the focus for policy, practice and funding projects. The operating elements of the Decade are similar to the governance measures that the EU has adopted in areas of social and education policy, such as the creation of National Action Plans, exchange of knowledge, policy coordination, and the attempt to bring together governments, intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations, and Romani civil society.


Both the Decade, and the EU Framework rely on a mix of legal, policy and funding instruments around Roma inclusion, combined with Roma advocacy and civil society participation (European Commission 2017a). As such, they attempt to bring together the formal/legal approaches to equality, with the recognition that many injustices ‘fly under the radar of formal justice’ (Eriksen 2016, 19). The low political representation and status of groups like the Roma can lead to persistent inequalities and cultural misrecognition that can happen even under ‘just’ formal procedures (Eriksen 2016).

Throughout the 2000s, NGOs have been significant in the construction of transnational networks that connected civil society with governments in (mainly) central/east Europe that lobbied the European Union. Their advocacy was crucial for maintaining EU and national policy attention on the Roma minority, but also regarding policy development, mediation and implementation, in what Ram (2011, 235) has called a process of ‘mutual dependence’ between NGOs and the EU. On the other hand, there are critics who highlight the perverse effects that some NGOs and certain EU initiatives have, in perpetuating discourses around Roma deficit (Matras, Leggio, and Steel 2015; Marushiakova and Popov 2015) and constructing the Roma as an object in need for policy interventions while overlooking processes and contexts of discrimination embedded in education systems (Brüggemann and D’Arcy 2017; Lambrev, Traykov, and Kirova 2018; Miškolci, Kováčová, and Kubánová 2017). Despite these justifiable criticisms, there is significant work carried out by NGOs that operationalise and challenge EU and national definitions of education opportunity.

The study

The research for this article was designed as a case study of Roma education policies, opportunities and transitions, and the methodological approach combines an analysis of the active interpretation and mediation of policies by practitioners and Roma students. The research data consists of:
(a) Reviews of documentary materials (EU and FRA policy documents; and, documents and reports produced by selected NGOs);

(b) Interviews with policy makers, policy practitioners, academics and students, specifically:

− 16 members of NGOs in Hungary in 2015–2016, with selective repeat email-interviews in 2017;

− 2 policy actors in the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) in Vienna (the head of sector for ‘Roma and migrant integration’, and a research officer);

− 4 University lecturers and 11 Roma students at the CEU in Hungary.

The combination of documentary reviews, in-depth interviews and discussions has provided insights into the complexity of defining education opportunities and equality at a transnational level, and into the designing of policies that may produce positive results for Roma students. The analysis allows an examination of the politics involved in this process, the positions of the EU, national governments and NGOs, and how their interactions frame and regulate the transition of Roma students through education. The interviews with the students and their lecturers have also opened up discussions about the connections between the abstract and distant policy levels, and the students who negotiate their individual trajectories within education systems that are shaped by the bigger policy frameworks.

The data was analysed thematically and then related to the research questions to produce six wider categories as presented below. These categories identify the possibilities but also the challenges and problems within the existing policy frames, contexts and conditions for successful education transitions, as presented in documents and interviews.

**Structural barriers to education progression**

In their progression through education, Roma students face a number of barriers presented in EU and NGO documents and discussed in individual interviews. These barriers relate to the themes of explicit school-segregation practices in several countries and municipalities; subtle segregation practices at the local government and school levels; less visible barriers of access and participation for Roma students related to school choice in competitive quasi-market systems; and, in many cases, low quality of schooling. Segregation practices (where schools or classrooms are fully or primarily composed of Roma pupils) have distinct expressions in education in many countries, especially, but not only, in central, eastern and south Europe. Often, segregation practices are accompanied by the systematic placement of Roma children in special education schools that, despite criticisms from human rights organisations and Court cases identifying this as ‘unlawful’ practice, is widespread (ERRC 2017a; Interviews with EERC staff). Different countries and localities have developed multiple ways of legitimising such practices and putting them to effect:

Legally Roma do not exist, we do not have it stamped on anyone’s ID card. But, I personally know at least 7–8 techniques on how to segregate children. In Hungary about 2/3 of Roma children are in segregated schooling. (Romaversitas director)

When segregation follows from the disproportionate allocation of Roma children in special schools and classes for children with ‘mild mental disabilities’, this is often the result of
psychological and pedagogical diagnostic tests, with linguistic tests also prominent in early education (New and Kyuchukov 2018). Categorising pupils by intellectual and linguistic ability, is often complemented by an assessment of the degree of ‘socially disadvantaged environment’ of the children (for example, the case of Slovakia, EERC 2017a) aiming, in principle, to provide children with preparation opportunities to enter mainstream education. Due to low quality of schooling and limited curricula in such environments, low expectations from teachers, and entrenched discriminatory attitudes, children allocated to special or preparatory schools/classes find that they have limited prospects to enter mainstream schools or programs that can lead to further education opportunities (FRA 2014; CEU lecturer). Many of the activities of the Roma Education Fund at the early years aim at addressing de-segregation, with promising results when Roma pupils attending preschool enrol in integrated primary schools, a necessary prerequisite for continuing transitions to secondary and tertiary education (REF, 2016; interview with REF programme manager 2016).

In addition, residential segregation is strongly linked to socio-economic and ethnicity-based segregation manifested in school intakes. This type of segregation based on residential patterns is exacerbated by parental choice of school, and is often used as an ‘excuse’ by local and national political authorities when they are criticised for failing to effect desegregation measures (Interview with REF director 2015; EERC 2017a). Parental choice of school is also a difficult practice for many underprivileged Roma parents since it often entails the need to transport students to a school far from the locality. Further to economic resource problems, there are issues of public perceptions and racism in the wider population. So, the concentration of students by ethnicity into different schools, or separate classrooms within the school is a common and popular practice with non-Roma parents:

My old school is now segregated. The majority of Hungarian parents took their children away because there were more Roma kids now. (Andrej, student from Serbia, Sociology graduate)

It is recognised in both documents and interviews that some of these problems are beyond the enforcement of legal requirements. There are issues of political will, quantity and quality of resources allocated to the improvement of schooling conditions, as well as prejudiced attitudes among the population that result in ethnically and socially segregated schools (ERRC 2017a, 2017b; FRA interviews).

Delineating equality and inclusion

Two significant issues emerge here, and they relate to: (a) the nature of equality and inclusion promoted by NGOs and students, as well as their reading of the EU framework on equality; and (b) the ‘location’ of equality definitions and implications for their realisation.

Defining equality and inclusion

In the EU documents and in the interviews with FRA and some NGO actors, there is clear awareness of the legal structures on non-discrimination, based on the Race Equality Directive (Council of the European Union 2000, Art.12). In principle, this Directive draws on an expansive definition of equality that ensures that governments promote policies that lead to equality of outcomes. Governments are thus under the legal duty to take positive
action – merely ‘ensuring the absence of discrimination is not enough’ (Interview, ERRC director). If a government does not act to redress inequalities to ensure that different groups are treated equally, they are in breach of the European Court of Human Rights legislation. The best example of such an expansive view of equality in education can be found in the decision of the European Court of Human Rights in the case of DH and others v Czech Republic on the common practice to place Roma children disproportionately into special education needs schools (Interview with FRA participants 2016).

However, despite its successes when individual cases arrive at the Court, even this strong interpretation of equality has been found ineffective for long term change in policy behaviour, since it has weak enforcement capacity, with measures taken at the discretion of states, and does not explicitly condemn the de facto segregation of groups in public services (Xanthaki 2005, 517). In addition, measures that are developed on the basis of ‘ideologies of individual equality’ have proved inadequate to ensure inclusion, because, as Agarin (2014, 748) argues, they ‘bracket out the structurally determined features at the heart of the exclusionary practices’ that individual Roma face in their communities.

Interviews at the European Roma Rights Centre and FRA support these arguments, and emphasise the significance of political action to implement the existing anti-discrimination legislation. One of the examples used in our discussions in ERRC points out the positive outcomes when governments actually implement legislation:

We had a case against Croatia about education segregation, where children were put in separate classes because they did not speak Croatian. Under that pretext they stayed for years in separate buildings and classes, never integrated in mainstream schools. We litigated the case at the European Court of Human Rights, and the Croatian government was found to be in violation of the European Convention. The good thing out of it was that the Croatian government actually implemented the judgement … of course there was pressure from civil society, from the college of ministers but also will of the government. They set up proper preparatory classes where children were learning the Croatian language … they really did everything to help them speak the language and eventually integrate in the mainstream school. (ERRC lawyer)

The legal approach to equality is seen as necessary but not sufficient to redress the deep-seated inequalities that affect most of the Roma populations (see also New and Kyuchukov 2018). Two further themes have been identified here in relation to discrimination, equality for minorities, and inclusive policies. The first concerns the need to address the wider population in order to raise awareness of the discrimination Roma students face. The second, relates to finding a balance between the needs of the Roma minority (in terms of operationalising intercultural and language rights) with the need for a general reform for an equal education.¹⁰ Both the EU Framework for Roma Integration and the NGOs operating in this field acknowledge the issue of minority rights as one to be addressed at national level. Some countries have opted for a ‘targeted approach’ on inclusion (aiming specifically at improvements for the Roma minority) whereas others opt for an ‘integrated approach’ whereby the whole school population is part of inclusion reforms (Friedman 2013). The targeted approach is much more common in the countries of central and eastern Europe, manifested for instance through Roma-specific quotas for entry to Universities (Salmi, Mihai Haj, and Alexe 2015). More integrated approaches are taken by the EU as a whole, and by countries that emphasise generalised human rights (for example
The Roma Education Fund is careful and strategic in defining its role in promoting the benefits for the whole society as a result of full participation in education of Roma children, but does not go as far as arguing for differentiated minority rights:

We are not suggesting that Roma inclusion should drive the big reform agenda in education – it should not. This is not what we promote. But, we need to close the gap between Roma and non-Roma. The gap is huge in many places, and very persistent. (REF director)

Roma inclusion means, in large part, desegregation of education systems and full participation of Roma children and parents in public education. National inclusion reforms should also be seen as beneficial to the majority as they are for various minorities. In the case of Roma inclusion in education, it is essential to ensure that arguments in favor of human rights and economic efficiency are closely linked. (REF 2010)

**Location and origin of equality and inclusion debates**

The EU is seen to provide a necessary global dimension to equality questions for the Roma, and an alternative to state-focused approaches that are often seen as problematic. Still, most interviewees recognise that it is at the national level that the rights for the Roma minority are realised, and that is where most of the complicity in producing Roma inequalities is rooted:

In the ERRC’s world-vision, where the discriminators are officials at national and local levels, the (European) Commission is a natural ally and counterweight – our movement’s friend … Now, there is buzz, especially after the European Ombudsman’s recent opinion, about whether the Commission is doing enough to make sure EU funds are not being spent by national authorities in ways that violate fundamental rights, such as EU-funded segregated schools. (ERRC lawyer)

The shift of some of the political responsibility and action from the national to the EU level has potential unintended consequences, and amongst the policy actors interviewed there are calls for caution in the ‘europeanisation of Roma’ problems (Interviews with REF policy officer; Roma Decade research and policy officer). The singling out of the Roma minority as a priority and special concern in Europe, has resulted in certain governments – especially in a background of heightened nationalist politics, to argue against measures for Roma people (Agarin 2014; Vermeersch 2012). For many of our interviewees the 2013 Council Recommendation on ‘effective Roma integration measures in the Member States’ is an attempt by the EU to remind states that realising equality and inclusion for the Roma populations is in effect a national political imperative. As Viviane Reding (the vice-president Justice Commissioner) stated when introducing the Recommendation, ‘the key tools for Roma integration are now in Member States’ hands and it is important that words are followed with action’.

At the same time, it is recognised that the transfer and adoption of equality legislation and inclusion policies in national legal and political institutions is a project fraught with difficulties and resistance (Interview, ERRC director). However sophisticated the legal definitions of equality, the inclusion agenda needs stronger policies for its implementation and embedding in institutions (schools, local and national education authorities), and a clearer commitment in addressing structural disadvantage and wider discrimination in the non-Roma population (Interview, REF director).
**EU policy design**

The gap between policy intentions at national and EU levels, and actual implementation in the form of equal participation and success of Roma students in education is highlighted particularly by our interviewees in ERRC, REF, Romaversitas, and the Decade, all of whom have discussed the crucial role of the EU Framework to support the work that they do. They point to the significance of establishing and maintaining Roma inclusion as a political priority, of making inclusion an accepted normative discourse for governments to integrate into national political norms, but also in regulating the use of regional EU funds and monitoring their spending by national and local governments. But, they also note the problematic nature of governance and regulatory requirements that are far too ‘soft’ for being effective, relying on ambiguous goals and often voluntary participation:

We have been waiting a long time for this EU Framework. And at the end we receive something which is not strong enough, does not contain anything that is compulsory for the Member States, and was not giving pathways to develop projects towards a direction. It gave a big space for the Member States to misunderstand this half page. (Romaversitas director)

The very openess and softness of the early governance instruments that have institutionalised the Roma inclusion discourse in policies, funding projects and programs, are seen as the main weaknesses when it comes to the effectiveness of implementation – a critique that applies to EU coordinating policy instruments in general, but, given the limits of subsidiarity, these may be the only possibilities available (Interview, FRA head of sector). The nature of EU governance in the field of education and inclusion, means that policy reform needs to be pursued as a joint commitment, with national governments having the primary responsibility for implementation (Alexiadou 2017).

But, many governments have shown lack of political will to implement equality policies in full, and often have long histories of institutionalised discrimination practices against Roma (ERRC 2017b; European Commission 2017a). In these cases, the soft governance nature of the EU Framework and the open coordination methods it relies upon are seen as inadequate. In the case of Roma this is even more problematic than other areas of voluntary action since there is limited data that measure the extent of the Roma students’ marginalisation in, or dropping out from, education. Starting with the issue of measuring the participation and progression of Roma children in education, the EU similarly to the Decade before it, have the difficult task of estimating the size and extent of the problem:

When the Decade started in 2005 it was a slogan: ‘we want to measure progress’, ‘we want quantifiable indicators’… now in 2015 we are still saying the same things… (Decade of Roma Inclusion Secretariat, Research & policy officer)

The majority of states do not register populations by ethnicity. Roma civil society organisations often have a negative position towards registration by ethnicity, produced by experiences of distrust of governments (Interview, REF programme officer). This can be problematic for the EU since the use of open coordination approaches relies on the compilation of disaggregated data that allows inequalities to be identified, and measured.
**Strategic minimum compliance**

The countries with the largest Roma populations in Europe have been engaging in ‘Roma inclusion’ strategies for about 20 years. Protection of Roma rights became a pre-condition for gaining membership to the EU in the 2004 and 2007 enlargement rounds, when countries with large Roma populations from central and eastern Europe where admitted to the EU. As Ram (2010, 206) argues, it was important for the EU to demonstrate concern for human rights, in addition to the more politically sharp incentives to improve the situation of Roma in their own countries, and so ‘to prevent their migration to other European countries’. As a result, countries that were preparing their accession to the EU, began creating a first round of ‘Roma integration strategies’ in the 1990s, which, were ‘often superficial and empty documents’ (Interview, REF programme manager). Since then, most of these countries took part in the Decade for Roma Inclusion, where the requirement to produce strategies continued. After the EU took over the activities of the Decade, and member states were expected to produce National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS), the practice of ‘copy and paste’ to show conformity with international obligations continues (Interview, ERRC lawyer). Significantly, there are differences between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ EU member states in the production of such strategies:

… the NRIS in Eastern Europe and Western Balkans by now are quite developed – they know how to write nice papers, for them it is already their 3rd strategy. They know the mechanisms of exclusion, on paper they all combat segregation, they know how to provide access to quality education. But, we also know that these mostly stay on paper. Very few of these (strategies) are implemented … For Western Europe it is the first time that they have to think about their Roma population … and it is a controversial policy. (Roma Decade Secretariat, research & policy officer)

In such conditions of a relatively weak implementation capacity from the EU and resistance by countries to effect change, many of the interviewees discussed at length the tendency of superficial compliance in national politics. Longstanding discourses of discrimination and exclusion for the Roma have perverse effects on how inclusion policies are interpreted:

There is a place called Hódmezővásárhely about 40,000 people with 6 or 7 schools and the mayor Mr János Lázár decided there is going to be no segregation. They closed down two very bad schools, mixed the children. He personally went to schools to explain the changes. And, it worked. 2–3 years later they commissioned a survey in that city and established that the performance across all groups was improved. Mr. Lázár, is now the Minister in charge of the Prime Minister’s office, the second most powerful person in this country, and never did roll that experiment to the rest of the country. Inclusion is in the hand of another portfolio. They believe in segregation – not that they would say that … We have a State Secretary for Inclusion – that is his English title, if you turn around his badge, his Hungarian title is Secretary of State for Catching Up. And ‘catching up’ since 1967 means ‘segregation’. Everybody understand that. And this is the official government position. (ERRC, director)

The double speech identified here draws on inclusionary discourses aimed at international audiences while continuing with exclusionary and segregationist policies and practices at home, a phenomenon recognised to apply across a number of countries with large Romani minorities (see, Ram 2010). In the absence of a stronger regulatory EU framework, the more visible role for the EU is seen to entail risks, especially when European
governments reframe the Roma issue as a European and not a national ‘problem’, and in so doing evade their political responsibility to ensure equality for minorities in their countries.

**Civil society, education transitions and equality work**

In the absence of high-quality education and developed welfare systems to deal with conditions of poverty and discrimination, NGOs (in this case the Roma Education Fund and Romaversitas) try to fill the institutional gap. The Roma Education Fund was created as part of the Decade for Roma Inclusion, and defines its main goal as ‘closing the gap in educational outcomes between Roma and non-Roma’. In order to achieve this goal, the organisation supports policies and programs that ‘ensure quality education for Roma, including the desegregation of education systems’. It has a wide range of objectives in relation to improving quality of education for Roma children, access to all levels of education, and combatting segregating schooling, and it pursues these objectives through the financing of projects and programmes, policy development and dissemination, and an extensive portfolio of scholarships for Roma students who pursue higher education studies.12 Romaversitas is a programme designed by REF, and aims to provide support to university students:

It serves as a bridge for Romani students to ensure they have access to quality resources and includes scholarships, mentoring, tutoring and additional training in professional development and language competences. (REF, Strategy paper 2015–2020)

The policies and actions of these NGOs to a large extent substitute for the functions and responsibilities of local and national governments, and they perform equality work at local level. Even though Romaversitas was created to support University students, this was clearly impeded by the low numbers of students who managed to successfully complete secondary and upper secondary education. As a result, they brought their operations down a level, in order to provide the right conditions and make transitions through the school system possible:

Language education in primary schools is so poor that wealthier parents pay for their children to do extra private lessons … But for those who are from poor regions, completing a good education at high school is not on the horizon. They cannot even imagine having such perspective in life … This year we have a Norwegian fund which goes to support youngsters finishing secondary education, so we go to the school level. (Romaversitas, director)

Without their (NGO) support, some of these students would not have made it here. (Central European University, lecturer)

In all of these ways, civil society organisations see themselves as performing the functions that school and state officials are either neglecting or deliberately obstructing – and this is recognised by the students and their lecturers. NGOs provide practical help to students to overcome obstacles in education, through removing barriers (financial, and related to the lack of social and cultural capital), but also provide ideological support for Roma students who are located in conditions of poverty, and often ethnic marginalisation. In addition, they perform further social and cultural functions in their equality work, in the form of identity-building, cultural recognition, and the creation of a Romani community:
The Romaversitas model helps strengthen students’ Romani identity and community participation. (REF, Strategy paper 2015–2020)

We want students who benefit from our scholarship programs to identify themselves as Roma, to act as role models … This is how we shall build a Roma group of intellectuals, a significant middle class. (REF, director)

Moving beyond the removal of barriers in education, this perspective aims to shape both aspirations and experiences, and to cultivate networks of Roma and a collective capacity for action that will increase young peoples’ possibilities to ‘access, benefit from and transform economic goods and social institutions’ (Sellar and Gale 2011, 116).

Success in transitions – individual experiences of education migration

The young people who took part in the study are success stories. They have negotiated the various stages of education transitions well, completed a university degree, and were at the time of the research, in the Central European University (with some financial support from REF) registered in preparatory programs, with the ambition of continuing to post-graduate studies in Hungary or in other European contexts. In total, the students were 5 men and 6 women from Roma backgrounds from Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Spain. With only one exception, they were the first in their family who completed a university degree, and three students in that group were the first in their family to complete upper secondary education. Two of the students come from an ‘average’ socio-economic background (their description), and the rest come from families with limited resources. As a group, these students have been motivated to move to Hungary, and in 3 cases from the periphery of Hungary to Budapest, in order to further their education opportunities that were limited in their place of origin. In this respect they are typical of young people migrating to avoid constraining conditions in their own local context, to find better education provision, and with the expectation of better future labour outcomes – thus linking mobility to economic opportunities and life-course events (Corcoran and Faggian 2017; Van Mol 2016). The (semi)core–periphery dynamic (King 2018) captures to a large extent these young peoples’ mobility: As the first post-enlargement generation from central and eastern Europe who (with the exception of the Spanish student) perceive their past university studies to be not as advantageous as the studies they hope to complete in an international university; Second, as students of an ethnic minority who are very conscious of the peripheral and disadvantaged status such an ethnic designation affords them. Within this context, the main themes from the interviews below capture the conditions and contexts that these young people describe as important in their own experiences, but also the dilemmas they face in terms of future identity positions.

All students, regardless of country of origin spoke of the significance of the family in supporting their decision to study and, for many of them, to move to a different country. The financial but also social resources that families provided, in combination with personal ambition to do well are typical in all the cases of students who are acutely aware of the magnitude of their decision to migrate for further studies:

I am the most successful in my family … I got support from my family … When I finished my degree I started to work but I felt I can do more. Then I found out about these programs … It is a big decision to move to another country. (Mariana, student from Romania, Social studies).
I am not the first to go to university – that was my uncle, and he was a kind of model for me and my family. My parents encouraged me to study, to become like him, but this also meant leaving … (Claudiu, student from Romania, Public Policy)

In addition to personal ambition and family support, the second dimension of decision-making that all students discussed related to the significance of institutional factors such as the type of school they attended, but also the critical role of individual teachers. All students emphasised attending a non-segregated school, something that they identified as a condition if Roma students have a chance of completing compulsory education and continuing their studies. In addition to the nature of the school, for most of our interviewees, there have been critical teachers who have provided support, positive and constructive feedback throughout their schooling:

I grew up and went to school in a small city of 8000 people, only 200 Roma. Too small for segregation, so I was in an integrated school. It was good, we supported and learnt from one another … I was the first to attend high school in my family! I had a teacher who said ‘you have to go’, I didn’t want to. He made the application to high school for me, and said ‘you must sign here and here’ (laughs) … I got a scholarship, I graduated as social worker, and then started to work but I wanted to do more and applied to a Masters. Now my sisters followed me to university. (Lajos, student from Hungary, Social Studies)

Two more themes defined the position of students in terms of their education pathways. The first was the argument that you need luck to get on well in education (most students talked of ‘having luck’ throughout or in critical moments of decision making), while they emphasised that as Roma students they had to work twice as hard as other students and to have higher ambitions:

I am a lucky person, there are so many things that had to come together to be able to be here. There is a systematic problem, so you need luck to overcome difficulties … If you are fighting against the system … I do not want to over-emphasise myself. I don’t want to be considered as exceptional in my community. There are so many others. I am not special. I was in a good place in the right time. (Katalin, student from Hungary, Public Policy)

Roma students have to make a triple effort to get ahead. (Manuel, PhD student from Spain)

We need to be even more ambitious than other students as Roma. We all experience differences in the classroom. We want to change those experiences, but we need to be lucky to do it- we want to change that. (Matei, student from Serbia, Sociology)

Another interview theme that seemed to produce different positions amongst the students, concerns the anticipated future relations to their Roma community. As part of their REF scholarships, the students are expected to contribute to the construction of a collective Romani identity and network, with the ambition that they will ‘offer back’ to the community after graduation. It is important to note here that the interviews with the students did not include questions about the role of the civil society organisations in their education. This was deliberate as part of the ethical requirements of the research, since the students were recipients of scholarships. In response to questions about future plans, students had strong views on the relations to the community, with two types of contrasting responses. Even though all students acknowledged the support they received throughout their education, ‘giving back’ can be seen as a burden:
I agree about giving back, but we also want to pursue our life. I am not only a Roma, I am also a man, have my interests … it can be a burden on my shoulders to always be seen as a Roma. Giving back to the community is a personal choice, but I don’t see it as my personal responsibility. (Lajos, student from Hungary, Social Studies)

The majority of the participants however, felt a strong sense of responsibility and desire to connect their future plans to working ‘for the Roma community’. For some of the students this ‘community’ was defined spatially: their own home, old school, town/village. For others it refers to the Roma community wherever that may be, such as poor and disadvantaged Roma groups that they were not even aware of before their more active involvement with Roma activism:

After my experiences of school, I want to serve other kids in my town, show them they can do it. (Andrea, student from Hungary, Sociology)

I worked for a Roma NGO in Romania. When we visited that trash area where Roma were living I was shocked. This was in my city … For me this (helping such groups) is the ultimate motivation. (Claudiu, student from Romania, Public Policy)

These eleven students are clearly successful in their school trajectories, in accessing and completing higher education, and in considering further studies. Despite their different countries of origin, they share certain characteristics. They all come from families of relatively low-to-middle financial standing in their respective countries, which, despite the variations do not include families in serious economic hardship. In addition, they all share high expectations and strong home support that have allowed them to concentrate on their studies and to embark on higher education. In addition to the family setting, all students experienced inclusive schooling environments, institutional support in the form of good, supportive teaching, and the lack of any serious structural barriers that seem to be at the root of exclusionary practices for many Roma students. The extent to which graduate students from peripheral areas return ‘home’ following their studies has been examined in the literature extensively, but as the interviews here also suggest labour market opportunities are not the only determinant (Rérat 2014; Smith, Rérat, and Sage 2014). Strong ideas around identity, family and community, underpin the experiences of these students, and their views of a possible future.

Concluding remarks

This article aims to bring new knowledge to the subject of transitions in education for Roma students, through a critical examination of policy both from the position of practitioners and participants (NGO and FRA participants, students and lecturers), as well as from the level of the official discourses as represented in policy documents and interviews. This approach enables an understanding of the nature of education transitions for the Roma minority and the policy support necessary to reverse the poor trends of participation and success of young Roma people in upper secondary and higher education across Europe.

The example of the students in this study clearly suggests that education pathways are not predetermined, rather they are negotiated and shaped by participants in their interactions with the school, family and wider social networks, and framed by welfare resources, policies and practices around equality and opportunity. But, the research also raises questions around the national and local education policies that systematically fail
large numbers of young Roma students with a very similar background to the ones who participated in this study. All students here highlighted the significance of attending integrated, good quality schools, and the support they received from NGOs, thus raising structural and systemic issues at the core of the conditions for education success. There is no doubt that the particular NGOs examined here provide substantial legal, financial and educational resources. In many cases, in the absence of high-quality education and welfare services NGOs provide substantial support to the social investment part of the welfare state, whereby they supplement governments in the provision of education, in preparation for labour market and for university entry. The participants in this study were grateful for their ‘luck’ to attend good schools as well as for the NGO help, and they certainly constitute positive welfare outcomes. Still, we should question the reliance of students on ad hoc, voluntary organisations for financial and mentoring help, instead of assuming this support as an integral part of a universal and high-quality schooling experience.

At the policy level, the research identifies serious tensions between political rhetoric and implementation especially at the level of national discourses around equality, inclusion, education investments and segregation practices. The EU framework of education and inclusion governance provides a steering to how national education systems should resolve these tensions through a combination of equality legislation and policy actions. The instruments of education governance in its disposal are rather weak, partly because of lack of competence at the EU level to use stronger regulation measures in most welfare areas, and partly because conceptions of equality are confined to individually-based anti-discrimination measures.

The co-existence of contradictory discourses and practices that influence policy outcomes at both national and EU levels is a political reality and illustrates the complexities of policy making processes and their uneven outcomes. As Neumann (2017) shows in her research, transnational pressures on national or local education systems may have transformative effects on education opportunities, but with differential effects on different parts of the targeted populations. On the one hand, we observe tensions between EU governance measures, definitions of inclusion and equality from EU, national and NGO actors, and long-established education practices of segregation in several schooling environments. On the other hand, there are considerable successes across Europe in relation to Roma inclusion in general, with governments committed to retain the issue in the political agenda (Kirova and Thorlakson 2015; Ram 2015) and with increasing numbers of Roma students who successfully negotiate schooling across Europe.

Similar to other research (Walther et al. 2015) we find that the political aim of ensuring that socially disadvantaged students have equal opportunities in their education trajectories, can only be realised when there is an alignment of universal and high-quality welfare and education provision, political commitment to equality, regulation and steering of institutional environments to make this a reality, and appropriate schooling structures and investment that positively pursue the ideal of inclusion.

Notes

1. The headline indicator ‘Early leavers from education and training’ measures the share of the population aged 18–24 with at most lower secondary education and not involved in further education or training during the four weeks preceding the survey. The share of early
leavers across the EU has fallen continuously from 17.0% in 2002 to 10.6% in 2017. In the next age bracket 17.2% of 20–34 year-olds were neither in employment, nor in education and training (Eurostat 2018).

2. See, The Council of the EU Recommendation of 28 June 2011 on policies to reduce ESL, *Official Journal of the European Union*, 191/2011 (2011/C 191/01). The Recommendation was followed by the setting up of a Thematic Working Group on ESL (2011–2013) which produced a policy report with ‘key messages’ (European Commission 2013), as well as a number of mapping and policy learning activities organised in the framework of Peer Learning Activities. Amongst the six second generation Working Groups (2014–2016) the tackling of ESL is one of the areas of focus but no longer a working group on its own. In the current Working Groups (2016–2018) the emphasis is on ‘continuity and transitions’ in learner development, with particular attention to education systems and structural issues that affect individual transitions (European Commission 2017b). As with all open coordination mechanisms in the field of education, the function of the working groups is to provide policy attention to identified policy problems, and to provide coordination and mutual learning through knowledge generation and exchange (Alexiadou 2017).

3. The term ‘Roma’ is used here to refer to different groups (Roma, Sinti, Kale, Gypsies, Romanichels, Boyash, Ashkali, Egyptians, Yenish, Dom, Lom), without denying the varieties of lifestyles of these groups (European Commission 2012). It is recognised that Roma are a heterogeneous group, and there is a need to be sensitive to framings that problematise the minority (Matras, Leggio, and Steel 2015).

4. The CEU in Hungary was included for two reasons (a) it collaborates with NGOs that provide support to Roma students who complete university degrees; and (b) it provides Roma Access & Graduate Preparation Programs (under the umbrella of the Romani Studies Program since 2017).

5. Even though the students included in the study are all university graduates, the paper does not focus specifically on the mechanisms of transition from school to university. It is also noted that these students come from different countries, so in that respect a systematic analysis of the ‘national’ level of education systems is missing. The experiences of these students are an illustration of the generic, systematic factors necessary for successful education transitions, and as an empirical ‘bridge’ between policies, governance and individual lives.


8. The NGOs are: (i) The Roma Education Fund (REF), a non-governmental organisation created in the framework of the Decade of Roma Inclusion in 2005. Its mission is to close the gap in educational outcomes between Roma and non-Roma. It provides policy development and scholarship programs to Roma students (http://www.romaeducationfund.org/).

   (ii) Romaversitas, an educational programme supported by REF to help Roma students complete their studies, find employment and build community. http://www.romaeducationfund.hu/news/ref/news-and-events/romaversitas-network-managers-build-program-capacity-and-strategy-improved-.

   (iii) The European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC), a public interest law organisation working to combat anti-Romani racism and human rights abuse through strategic litigation, research, policy development, advocacy and human rights education, http://www.errc.org/.

9. There are hopes this is changing: in what is seen as a unique legal example of desegregation in Europe, Hungary’s highest court ordered the closure and desegregation of an elementary

10. For a discussion on the links between anti-discrimination legislation, minority rights, and inclusion policies in relation to Roma, see Pap (2015).

11. The EU delegated to the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) the task to form an indicator’s working group. FRA organised large scale surveys on immigrants and ethnic minorities (FRA 2016), and specifically on Roma (FRA 2014).

12. REF is funded by a combination of private foundations, multilateral agencies, bilateral as well as private donors (see http://www.romaeducationfund.hu/ref-operational-guidelines).

13. We asked the students to define the socio-economic condition of their family in relation to (a) family income, occupation, level of education; (b) education expectations; and (c) their local area. The students described mostly a relatively low-income and occupation level of the family, but high levels of education expectations, especially compared to the perceived expectations from other families in their locality.

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