EDUCATIONAL STRATEGIES AND THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL MEDIATOR IN ROMA COMMUNITIES – A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF EUROPEAN UNION COUNTRIES

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Abstract: *This article compares educational strategies for the inclusion of Roma children in Romania, Spain, and Slovakia, focusing on the role of the school mediator and teaching assistant. In Romania, the school mediator is a key resource, but one that is poorly funded. Slovakia works with teaching assistants and social workers, who, although they have well-defined roles, are few. Spain, on the other hand, stands out for its development of multi-year mediation programs, funded and implemented with the support of public authorities and NGOs. Thus, there is a need for institutional consolidation and more consistent resources to improve access to education for disadvantaged communities.*

Key words: *educational policies, school mediator, Roma, strategies.*

1. Introduction

In both the Romanian and the European educational contexts, Roma communities face difficulties in terms of access to and attendance at classes, as well as social inclusion.

The school mediator acts as a bridge between the school, students, and families, playing an essential role in overcoming obstacles to education and facilitating their inclusion in school.

This article is not a practical study but is based on a comparative analysis of strategies for equality, inclusion, and participation of Roma until 2030 in Romania and other European countries. Thus, in the following, I will identify the main objectives of the strategies, as well as the measures and solutions that countries propose for the various problems encountered.

The purpose of this study is to analyse educational strategies and highlight the role of school mediators in increasing access to education in Roma communities, especially when it comes to inclusion and support in education to achieve academic success for Roma students.

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2. The Main Concepts underlying the Study

According to authors Ionescu and Cace (2006), public policies indicate a succession of interrelated decisions that aim to respond to needs arising in a community, reducing discrepancies in various areas. Thus, the aim is to identify the problem, set objectives, and establish the means and resources necessary and allocated to solving the problem. In this paper, I will focus on public education policies for Roma communities both in Romania and in other two European countries.

Inclusion refers to giving every citizen the opportunity to participate in social life. Thus, inclusion emphasizes the principles of equal opportunities, cooperation, justice, and solidarity. Furthermore, diversity is not seen as a negative thing, but rather as beneficial and conducive to the enrichment of society as a whole. There are also public policies that contribute to social inclusion by overcoming differences and emphasizing equal opportunities. In the case of this paper, we can talk about educational integration, which involves integrating a student of a different ethnicity/culture/disadvantaged background into a class of typical students. In this sense, integration does not mean renouncing the principles and foundations of society as a whole, but changing the way of thinking of the majority of the population, as well as disadvantaged people, in our case the Roma ethnic group (Strategy for Roma Equality, Inclusion, and Participation until 2030, 2021).

Marginalized Roma communities are defined as human settlements of Roma people that are recognized by those around them and that face poverty, social exclusion, or a lack of services.

Coposescu (2000) shows that, although the word "ethnicity" is relatively recent, its connection with group and cultural solidarity dates back a long time, similar to "the history of humanity". Furthermore, according to the 1953 edition of the Oxford Dictionary, the term "ethnicity" refers to "the quality of belonging to an ethnic community or group" or even to a field of study, more specifically the typology of peoples and interactions between groups, emphasizing the difference between "me" and "others".

The term "Roma" refers to an ethnic group, more specifically the Roma population, while the term "Romanian" refers to the citizens of Romania and the language they speak. Furthermore, the term "Romani," despite its similarity, is not related to the country of Romania (Ahsan Ullah et al., 2024). Currently, there is a preference for using the term "Roma" instead of "Gypsy", as the latter has negative connotations due to their history of discrimination, social exclusion, and marginalization. Ahsan Ullah et al (2024) mention that the term "Gypsy" can be used when referring to their past, but throughout this article I will use the term "Roma".

According to Rostaș (2019), anti-Gypsyism is a distinct form of racism, found constantly in both social structures and state institutions. It can also be identified in various choices and unfair practices nowadays.

2.1. History of the Roma – key milestones

Over time, the history of the Roma has been marked by a series of significant events,

such as: in the 9th century, the Roma migrated from India to Europe; in the 14th century, they settled in Central and Eastern European countries; and then, in the 18th century, they were enslaved in the European countries of Montenegro and Wallachia. This was followed by the Holocaust, when the Roma were victims of genocide, and then massacred and deported from Romania to Transnistria (Radu, 2022). During the communist period, emphasis was placed on policies of assimilation of the Roma, who were then granted the right to political representation in the post-December period. According to Iancu (2016), quoted in Radu (2022), in contemporary times, Roma are often considered the "losers of Europeanization", being the only ethnic group that has failed to meet the minimum social and economic standards of the European Union.

In order to understand the current situation of the Roma, it is imperative to know their history. Thus, the historical moments mentioned above contributed both to the formation of a social and cultural identity and to the transmission of discrimination and prejudice from one generation to another. The Holocaust and the deportation of the Roma from Romania to Transnistria also left their mark on the Roma community. An important step in their evolution took place during the communist and post-communist periods, when the Roma fought for the recognition of their rights. Therefore, every moment in their long and painful history is necessary to understand their journey and contemporary challenges, but also to identify solutions to help them in their social, economic, and political evolution in the years to come.

3. Educational Policies for the Roma in Romania

Ionescu and Cace (2006, cited in Radu 2020), identify three stages in the policies addressed to the Roma in Romania. The first of these, also known as the "period of unstructured searches", took place in the first half of the 1990s. During this time, numerous pilot projects and programs were carried out with the aim of understanding the social systems that could and should be intervened in.

The second stage took shape in the second half of the 1990s, also known as the "period of understanding responsibilities". During this period, intervention strategies and programs were developed by state institutions and NGOs with the aim of responding to the identified needs.

The last stage, but not the least, began in 2001 and continues to this date. It is called the "period of assuming responsibilities", and during this period, state authorities have guaranteed that they will address the situation of the Roma, identifying optimal solutions to the problems they face.

3.1. Romania's Strategy for Roma Inclusion (2022–2027) and the role of the school mediator

Since this article focuses specifically on education, we will briefly present the Romanian Government's Strategy for the Inclusion of Romanian Citizens Belonging to Roma Minorities for the period 2022–2027, exclusively from an educational perspective. Thus, among the problems encountered by ethnic Roma, one could mention: early

school leaving, low kindergarten attendance, school segregation, illiteracy, and, last but not least, poor quality education. This strategy aims to ensure Roma access to inclusive, quality education from kindergarten to university, reduce school segregation, combat and prevent early school leaving, and promote interculturalism. As measures proposed to address these issues, the strategy mentions programs such as "After School," support for Roma students who are at risk of dropping out of school, scholarships for Roma pupils and students and campaigns to raise awareness of the seriousness of school segregation and discrimination in schools and beyond. The school mediator is also a concrete mechanism provided for in the 2022-2027 strategy.

According to Order No. 1539 of July 19, 2007, issued by the Ministry of Education, Research, and Youth, school mediators carry out their activities both in pre-university settings and in the communities to which those educational institutions belong. A school mediator may be hired if requested by either the school or the community, or at the suggestion of the parents of students at the school, or even at the suggestion of school inspectorates, local or county public authorities, government organizations, or NGOs. In addition, the school mediator is an agent of the community in its relationship with the school, with the role of representing the school in the community and the community in the school (Bertea et al., 2008).

According to the same Order, the following are eligible for the position of school mediator: persons who have completed at least 8 years of schooling, followed either by vocational training with a qualification as a school mediator and subsequently completing at least high school education, or high school graduates who have completed a vocational training course for school mediators approved by the Ministry of Education, Research, and Youth. Priority is given to persons who have completed a school mediator course through the PHARE program and who have not previously worked as mediators. In addition, it is recommended that prospective school mediators be familiar with the language and culture of the community in which the school is located.

Szasz and Csesznek (2019) mention that in Romania, after the communist period, a number of organizations from outside the country introduced the idea of school mediators, starting to implement it in more difficult, vulnerable schools. During the same period, the non-profit organization Romani Criss, together with the Intercultural Institute, recommended establishing the position of school mediator within the Romanian education system. Thus, in Romania, the school mediator has been a professional role since 2001.

As mentioned by Szasz and Csesznek (2019), the role of school mediator has been recognized in Romania since 2001, and between 2003 and 2014, the Romanian Ministry of Education trained over 1,200 Roma school mediators to intervene in schools considered "problematic". In addition, UNICEF Romania, the Ministry of National Education, and other governmental and non-governmental institutions have trained approximately 60 school mediators annually since 2011, and during that same period, the "School Mediator's Guide – for Roma Communities" was developed.

The school mediator falls into the category of auxiliary teaching staff (Szasz & Csesznek, 2019) and, like any employee, has a number of responsibilities, ranging from improving communication between the school – community – family, to monitoring

kindergarten or school-age children who have never been enrolled in either, with the aim of encouraging their families to respect their right to education by enrolling them in the educational environment (Bertea et al., 2008).

The school mediator is also responsible for cultivating trust and respect between the school and the community and vice versa, monitoring children at risk of dropping out of school and encouraging them to exercise their right to education, informing the competent authorities about possible situations in which children's rights are being violated, and closely supervising the steps taken to resolve such cases.

In addition, the school mediator communicates all data recorded in the community to schools so that children can benefit from equal access to education and participates in promoting community culture within the school through activities carried out together with parents. The school mediator also supports the implementation of support programs to optimize school results, such as "after-school programs", remedial programs, or personalized training tailored to students' needs, etc.

Another task of the school mediator, according to the 2008 occupational standard, is to rigorously, consistently, and objectively report all irregularities concerning education, as well as those of other origins, which have consequences on the child's participation in education. In this regard, the school mediator liaises with the school and the families of children in the community, explaining to them the importance of school in the life of each student and also mentioning that in Romania compulsory education is 10 years (National Education Law No. 1 of January 5, 2011, 2011), with compulsory education to be increased to 16 years by 2030, specifically from kindergarten to pre-university education, inclusive (Iohannis, 2021).

4. The European Union Strategic Framework for Roma Equality, Inclusion, and Participation 2020–2030

According to the European Union Strategy for Roma Inclusion 2020-2030, there are between 10 and 12 million ethnic Roma in Europe, and the main problems encountered are discrimination, anti-Gypsyism, and, last but not least, socio-economic exclusion.

The European Union Strategic Framework for Roma Equality, Inclusion and Participation 2020 – 2030, mentions that although progress has been made in education between 2011 and 2020, inequalities in various areas still exist, and the situation of Roma communities has been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Among other things, the European Union aims to ensure quality and inclusive education and reduce school segregation. Thus, by 2030, the European Union aims to halve the level of school segregation, ensure that 70% of Roma children attend kindergarten, and that the majority of ethnic minorities complete at least high school. To achieve these goals, the European Union proposes inclusive, non-segregated education, scholarships, parental involvement, and teacher training to reduce or even combat stereotypes.

In the next section, I will briefly describe the main provisions of the strategies in Romania, Slovakia, and Spain. I chose these countries because each has a large Roma community, and by analyzing them, we can identify models of good practice and

effective solutions for their inclusion. Furthermore, my study is a comparative documentary analysis of the main provisions of national strategies, providing a clear picture of official approaches without involving direct empirical research.

4.1. Strategy for Roma Equality, Inclusion, and Participation until 2030 – Slovakia

According to this strategy, Slovakia's objectives in the field of education are to combat school segregation through local and national policies, facilitate access to preschool education for Roma ethnic groups by providing spaces, places, and, where appropriate, transportation, increase secondary and tertiary education attendance, and achieve inclusion. In addition, the strategy aims to improve educational outcomes in marginalized Roma communities from early childhood education to entry into the labor market, as well as the training and employment of teachers, support staff, and teaching assistants who speak Romani.

According to the Strategy for Roma Equality, Inclusion, and Participation in Slovakia until 2030, we identify as problems school segregation (in separate schools or classes), early school leaving, especially when moving from primary to middle school and later when going to high school, poor access, even limited access to preschool and early childhood education, poor school results, hidden costs (Roma families cannot afford fees for hygiene, trips, class funds, limiting their children's access to education) and, last but not least, the absence of a network of school/educational mediators at national level.

As measures, the strategy proposes policies aimed at combating segregation and providing financial and logistical assistance to Roma ethnic groups so that they can attend kindergarten and school. In addition, training courses are held for teachers to develop their intercultural skills in order to reduce stereotypes and develop the teaching of the Romani language. The strategy mentions national programs such as: "School Open to All", "Supporting Professions in Education," and "Support for Preschool Education for Roma Children", all designed to help include the Roma in education and beyond. Slovakia's strategy does not include the concept of school mediator, but refers to teaching assistants and field social workers. They work as a team to carry out the tasks that a school mediator performs in Romania, such as supporting teachers and children, building bridges between families, schools, and social services, and helping parents enroll their children in kindergarten, school, and high school. Therefore, teaching assistants work in schools, but they are employed through programs that run for limited periods of time ("Support professions in the education of children and students", "Support for the preschool education of Roma children"), using European or, where applicable, government funds, while field social workers are employed by local authorities or, where appropriate, by non-governmental organizations.

4.2. Spain's national strategy for Roma equality, inclusion, and participation 2021–2030

In Spain, a number of problems have been identified in the field of education, relating to school segregation, early school leaving, low participation of ethnic minorities in both kindergarten and university, high illiteracy rates, the digital divide, and the presence of

anti-Gypsyism and discrimination in schools, which is a real factor negatively influencing the integration of Roma students.

As a result of the problems identified above, the objectives of Spain's National Strategy for Roma Equality, Inclusion, and Participation 2021–2030 include eliminating "ghetto" schools, combating school segregation, reducing early school leaving, increasing school and kindergarten attendance among Roma, encouraging and helping the Roma to enroll in and attend higher education, reducing differences between Roma girls and boys in education, recognizing Roma culture and history in schools, and promoting cultural diversity.

As measures necessary to achieve the aforementioned objectives and implicitly resolve the identified problems, the strategy highlights the need for policies to combat segregation at local and regional level, the provision of scholarships and the implementation of programs to support students from middle school to university, introducing intercultural education as a subject, running campaigns to highlight the importance of the Roma and other ethnic minority students attending kindergarten, implementing digital programs such as "Educa Digital" and "Digital Skills for Children", and introducing mediation and educational support programs for both students and families.

In Spain, school mediators are supported by the state and non-governmental organizations, and their roles include preventing early school leaving, building bridges between school and family, and, last but not least, bringing the community closer to teachers and vice versa by eliminating stereotypes. In addition, the educational mediator is not institutionalized as a fixed position found in every school.

5. Comparative Study of Strategies in Romania, Slovakia, and Spain – Matrix

To better present the results of the comparative, I created a matrix in which I compare the three strategies for Roma inclusion in Romania, Slovakia, and Spain in order to highlight both the similarities and the differences. Thus, some practices in one country can serve as a model for others to follow, and vice versa.

Comparative study   Table 1

Country	Objectives	Measures	School mediator
Romania – Strategy "The Romanian Government's Strategy for the Inclusion of Romanian Citizens Belonging to the Roma Minority 2022–2027"	- combating segregation - increasing attendance in the education system - combating early school leaving - increasing the inclusion of Roma children in the formal education system - ensuring education in schools with a predominantly Roma student body - promoting interculturalism	- training of mediators and impact assessment - Roma inspectors, mentoring, scholarships, and remedial education - educational programs and nurseries/kindergartens in Roma communities - facilities for teachers in marginalized areas	- support for students, families, and schools - supports the participation of Roma ethnic groups in the educational process - school mediators are public policy tools for the Roma inclusion

Country	Objectives	Measures	School mediator
Slovakia – Strategy "Strategy for Roma Equality, Inclusion, and Participation by 2030"	- combating school segregation - facilitating access to preschool education for Roma ethnic groups - increasing school attendance - inclusion of Roma ethnic groups - improving school results - training and hiring teachers, auxiliary staff, and teaching assistants who speak Romani	- Financial and logistical support to enable children to attend kindergarten and school - Training courses for teachers to develop intercultural skills - Development of teaching in the Romani language - Programs such as „School Open to All", „Supporting Professions in Education", and „Support for Preschool Education for Roma Children"	- teaching assistant and social worker. - support for schools, fami-lies, and children. - employed by schools or local authorities/NGOs.
Spain – Strategy „*Strategy for Equality Inclusion and Participation of the Roma until 2030*"	- eliminating "ghetto" schools, combating school segregation - minimizing early school leaving - increasing attendance in the education system - recognizing Roma culture and history in schools - promoting cultural diversity - increasing the academic success of students in compulsory education - reducing discrimination	- scholarships for Roma students and young people - introduction of intercultural education - campaigns to highlight the importance of attending school - digital programs such as "Educa Digital" and "Digital Skills for Children" - mediation and support programs for students and their families - training teachers in the field of school assistance and Roma teachers	- mediators supported by the state and NGOs. - bringing the Roma com-munity closer to teachers - preventing school dropouts and connecting schools with families - non-institution-al-ized position

According to the above matrix, Romania focuses on increasing school participation, more specifically on the attendance of the education system by Roma ethnic groups and on reducing early school leaving among them. In addition, Romania aims to combat school segregation and promote interculturalism. All these objectives highlight the need to facilitate access to education for Roma students and at the same time reduce disparities.

In Slovakia, the focus is on combating segregation, training teachers who work in Roma communities, including those who speak Romani, and improving school results. There is also a clear link between inclusion and the role of early childhood education.

Spain focuses not only on reducing early school leaving and combating segregation, but also on recognizing and promoting the culture and history of the Roma ethnic group and reducing gender discrimination.

Thus, based on this information, we can see that Romania and Slovakia insist on access to and attendance of the education system by the Roma, while Spain goes further than that by also emphasizing identity and gender equality.

If we look at the measures section, we see that Romania is doing very well in this regard. Thus, ethnic Roma benefit from scholarships, programs such as "After School", "Second Chance", remedial education, school supplies, the "Euro 200", nurseries and kindergartens in disadvantaged communities, and facilities for tenured teachers working in marginalized Roma communities. In terms of institutions, there are school inspectors for Roma students, school mediators who are hired and trained, and the school mediation program.

Slovakia has measures focused on financial and logistical support for access to education, educational programs ("School Open to All", "Support for Preschool Education of Roma Children"), teacher training in intercultural issues, and teaching in the Romani language. Thus, we can see that Slovakia emphasizes institutional and linguistic support for Roma students.

In Spain, we find measures for the inclusion of Roma students in education: scholarships, the introduction of the subject "Intercultural Education" in schools, programs such as "Educa Digital", awareness campaigns on the importance of education and school attendance for Roma children, teacher training in the field of school assistance, and, last but not least, mediation and support programs for students and their families. Thus, Spain emphasizes cultural recognition, digitization, and diversity.

In Romania, the school mediator is institutionalized and has the role of facilitating the student-school-family relationship, representing one of the policies for Roma inclusion. While in Romania we talk about school mediators, in Slovakia we talk about teaching assistants (employed by the school) and field social workers (employed by local authorities or NGOs). Spain has school mediators supported by the state and NGOs, but they are not institutionalised, their role being to prevent early school leaving and to build bridges between families and schools.

6. Conclusions

Educational policies for the Roma play a key role in ensuring equal opportunities and social cohesion. Romania has made considerable progress towards Roma inclusion by recognizing the Romani language, strengthening the school environment and its role, awarding scholarships to Roma pupils and students, reserving places for them, and implementing programs such as "Second Chance".

As far as the European Union is concerned, the 2020-2030 Strategy highlights common lines of action, namely equal access to education, reducing early school leaving and, last but not least, combating segregation, although the way in which these measures are approached and implemented varies.

At the same time, the fact that we are beginning to encounter school mediators in more and more countries, under different names but with the same purpose, is a positive sign of recognition of the importance of this role in promoting social inclusion and cohesion.

Regarding the comparison between the strategies of the three countries, we can conclude that Romania has a consistent network of school mediators, but faces difficulties in assessing its impact, thus requiring solid studies in this regard. In Slovakia, there are both teaching assistants and field workers, who have well-defined roles, but

the lack of resources hinders their smooth operation. Spain has the most complex model, focused on both cultural recognition and reducing discrimination, but without giving the mediator an institutionalized status.

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