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## **Roma children's school segregation as a persistent public educational system issue in Romania**

**Fernando VARGA**

Babeş-Bolyai University, Romania, fernando.varga@ubbcluj.ro

### **Abstract**

School segregation of Roma has become one of the most studied disciplines in the field of education in the last 20 years. Even though research mentions its persistence, no studies have shown how it persists, this study aims to fill this gap in the specialized literature. Based on the analysis of several reports, this qualitative study aims to show how the school segregation of Roma in Romania survives in the mainstream education system. Despite the fact that in 2004 the state recognized the seriousness of the problem and introduced Ordinance 1540/2007 prohibiting all forms of school segregation, many public school units in Romania continue to practice this form of discrimination against Roma children. School segregation is a persistent problem in Romania, and studies show that between 1998 and 2016, the proportion of segregated schools increased significantly, becoming a barrier in the Roma integration process. The recommendations of the study on solutions against the school segregation of Roma children aim to involve Roma civil society in the process of monitoring segregated schools, enrolling Roma children from residentially segregated communities in mixed schools, and informing parents about the consequences of segregation on Roma children.

**Keywords:** Roma children, public school segregation, discrimination, education quality, racism.

## **Introduction**

Despite the efforts of members of Roma civil society and the European Union to combat school segregation, it persists. Segregation in public schools is illegal under the law since it harms Roma communities. The goal of this research is to look into how school segregation of Roma students continues in Romania's public education system. To do this, the article employs a qualitative method based on content analysis.

Segregation in schools is defined by sociological studies as the separation of Roma children from their peers. The quality of education in segregated schools is generally poor due to inadequate infrastructure. These factors lead to problems such as repeating grades, dropping out and leaving school early (Rotaru, 2019).

Data gathering entailed identifying several national reports on school segregation of Roma students. For this study, a total of four national reports were discovered and reviewed, which were complemented by two more international publications in which the situation in Romania was also examined. These are presented chronologically to emphasize the continuation of educational segregation. The research has limitations since the statistical data is rather old, with the most recent national report dating from 2016.

As a result of the research results, it appears that Roma children have been constantly segregated in Romania over the years and their percentage has consistently increased. In 1998, 12% of schools segregated Roma children. In 2016, the percentage of segregated schools increased to 20%. School segregation has persisted in Romania over time, as it is the result of racist and prejudiced manifestations against Roma communities, and the effect of residential segregation. The study's suggestions for preventing school segregation: (1) Involve Roma members of civil society in the school monitoring process. (2) Facilitating access to mixed schools for Roma children from segregated residential areas. (3) Roma parents must be informed about the consequences of school segregation on the future of their children and the community.

## **Roma access to education**

When it comes to education, the Roma remain the most disadvantaged minority population in Europe, despite social science research that describes education as a critical component in the integration of Roma into society. According to the National Roma Integration Strategy (2019), 68% of Roma children tend to drop out of school early. In 2021, only 27% of Roma children were enrolled in early education (EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2022). Overall, over 80% of out-of-school children are Roma and at least 18% of Roma children are uneducated. Only 0.1% of Roma children graduate to the next level of education. It was calculated that 28% of the Roma population is functionally illiterate (Rotaru, 2019).

The study by Avery and Hoxhallari (2017) reveals the barriers that prevent Roma children from accessing education. They believe that poverty is the main barrier to Roma participation in education. Another factor influencing the absence of Roma children is the discriminatory attitude of the majority towards Roma, which is influenced by stereotypes and anti-gypsyism. The Roma's perception of the futility of completing their studies is also a factor in this regard. Other socio-cultural causes identified in the literature include a lack of ethnic Roma models and early marriage (in the case of traditional communities), both of which limit Roma access to education, particularly among girls (Velentza, 2020). School segregation and dropout are two other issues that contribute to Roma children's limited access to the education system.

Dropping out of school is a problem that requires more investigation. The early education system is abandoned by 30% of the Roma community. It's worth noting that school dropout rates among ethnic Roma boys are higher than among girls. Although the Romanian media portrays girls as being more vulnerable to school dropout due to early marriage, Edupedu.ro (2022) reports that boys aged 14-15 drop out at a higher rate than girls. According to Pescaru (2018), there are two types of causes that favor school dropout: (1) Socio-familial factors - parents' negative attitude towards school; inability to provide the child with the necessary goods (eg clothes, shoes, textbooks, etc.) to enable the child to attend school; detention of children for household economic activities; lack of children's identity documents; parental migration; inappropriate parenting style, such as delinquency or alcoholism; and Roma-specific traditions, such as Roma law. (2) Individual causes include children's dissatisfaction with school; psycho-intellectual deficiencies or poor health, and early marriage.

## **Defining the concept of school segregation of Roma children**

The concept of segregation must be included when discussing Roma's access to education. This phenomenon is characterized by the lack of positive relations between different social groups (Enos & Celaya, 2018). Segregation limits inter-community interactions, causing disadvantage and stigmatization of vulnerable communities, isolating them from general participation in social life, and causing social exclusion, impairment, and social discrimination (Gallego-Noche & Goenechea-Permisán, 2020).

School segregation is described in sociological studies (Patache & Negurita, 2020) as a practice aimed at creating homogeneous classes of Roma students. These school units are created both by "gadjei" ("non-Roma person") and by the Roma community itself. According to the Óhidy (2022) school segregation is considered to be the result of social alienation from ethnic communities, discrimination, and school failure. However, many countries see it as the most cost-effective, short-term solution to - the very same problems that cause segregation in the first place. The poorest Roma community members who live in residential segregation condemn this practice, but still, agree to send their children to such schools in order to protect their cultural identity or in order to protect them from being bullied by other non-Roma children.

According to the author couple Moisa and Roth (2011), the earlier children are exposed to school segregation, the greater the impact will be in the future. The segregation of Roma children is higher in elementary school and lower in high school and vocational school, due to the low presence of Roma children in the higher levels of education (Cassisi, 2020). Alexandru, (2018) describes 3 determining factors - contributing to the emergence of school segregation of Roma children: residential segregation, local/national educational policies, and school choice. In the residential segregated areas, one can notice the fact that the state creates separate schools, especially for Roma children, which are also derogatorily called "ghetto schools". Usually, these schools are attended especially by Roma children, being the result of residential segregation. In such cases, even if there is another school nearby, Roma children will not be accepted, for the reason that "there are no spots left"( Rostas, 2012 cited by Alexandru, 2018).

Segregated schools have the inadequate infrastructure, and the quality of education is generally poor. These factors result in issues such as repeating grades, skipping school, and early drop out.

There is also a lack of human resources that genuinely care about being inclusive in the educational system; typically, the curriculum in such schools is inferior, and the teaching staff does not prepare the children to face the educational requirements of high school or vocational school (Rotaru, 2019).

According to the study by Gwendolyn and her collaborators (2015), in certain countries in Europe it is practiced to place Roma children in schools for children with mental disabilities (for example, psychological disorders, ADHD, dyslexia), so-called "special schools". Roma children between the ages of 6 and 10 are 27 times more likely to be diagnosed with a mental disability compared to non-Roma children. The diagnosis is based on rigged IQ tests, resulting in them being placed in special schools for mental disabilities. The consequences of this fact are dire: special education renders Roma children functionally illiterate, hindering the possibilities of pursuing higher education and limiting their potential. The law requires parents to agree to that diagnosis. However, in most cases, parents of Roma children are not informed about this aspect, and in some cases, they are either forced to accept or are manipulated to believe that their children will benefit from clothes, school supplies, or even monetary incentives, which causes very poor parents to accept the diagnosis and thus the child will be sent to special classes (Rostas, 2012 cited by Alexandru, 2018).

## **Methodology**

The purpose of this study is to examine how the school segregation of children persists in the public education system in Romania, even though, according to the legislation, it should have been eliminated from the education system since 2007. The research aims to answer the following question: How does the segregation of Roma children persist in the public education system in Romania? The research uses a qualitative methodology based on content analysis to answer this question.

Data collection involved the identification of several national reports on the school segregation of Roma students. For this study, a total of four national reports were discovered and reviewed, which were supplemented with two more international publications in which the situation in

Romania was also examined. The selected reports were chosen according to their credibility and representativeness, so the research focused on national reports on public schools, those made by the IFR are studies based on the answers of the respondents. Those achieved at the national level are presented chronologically to emphasize the continuation of educational segregation.

## **Results**

### **Segregation of Roma children in Romanian public schools between 1998-2016**

Following the example of Western European countries, Romania banned the segregation of Roma children in 2007, by adopting Order 1540/19.07.2007. School segregation, according to the regulations, is a serious form of discrimination that results in children's unequal access to high-quality education, thereby violating the equal exercise of the right to education. By adopting this decision, the Romanian state undertook to establish an educational framework in which segregation is prohibited; In addition, this legislative act approves the methodology to prevent the school segregation (O.M.E.C.T. nr. 1540/19.07.2007).

Segregated schools are defined by Romanian legislation (Order no. 6134/2016) as school units with a high percentage of Roma children in groups, classes, buildings, placing them in the back of the classroom, or other facilities. In other words, school segregation is a mechanism that isolates Roma children from the rest of the children, to narrow them in a single group, class or building. As a result, placing Roma children in the last seats in the classroom is a discriminatory act, but not a form of segregation, because the principle of physical separation from the rest of the children is not fully fulfilled. Moreover, the children will have the opportunity to communicate and interact with the rest of the non-Roma students, even if they are placed behind the class.

Jigau and Surdu (2002) conducted the first research on school segregation on a sample of 20,000 rural schools in 1998, with the aim of evaluating and measuring the situation of school segregation in Romania. Based on these findings, they classified schools into three categories: mixed (where the proportion of Roma students varies between 1% and 50% of the total school population), majority (where the percentage of Roma children varies between 50% and 70% of the total population) and a predominantly Roma (where the proportion of Roma children in the

school or class exceeds 70%). According to the authors (Jigau and Surdu, 2002), the vast majority of schools were mixed (87%); in 201 schools (6.4%), Roma students were the majority; and in 183 school units (5.8%) the population of Roma children predominated. In other words, 384 (12.2%) rural schools in Romania were segregated in 1998.

UNDP (2002) conducted a more recent study on a nationally representative sample of Romania's Roma community. During this study, the questionnaire included a question about child segregation and 13.5% of the participants responded that "in the classes where the children study, the majority of their classmates are Roma." This finding is very similar to Jigau and Surdu's (2001), who found that 12.2% of rural schools were segregated

In her work, Laura Surdu (2008) conducted a qualitative study on 134 schools from 9 counties in Romania. Out of the total number of participating schools, 31.6% had a population of Roma students over 50%. and 17 of them were made up entirely of Roma children. According to the author, this aggressive school segregation was caused due to the phenomenon of white flight, which essentially means the withdrawal of non-Roma students from schools where the share of Roma students is significant.

CADO (2016) collected the most recent data (nationally) on school segregation from 407 school units in North-East Romania. Only 292 of the 407 schools provided the complete data needed to analyze school segregation at the unit or class level. According to the findings, segregation exists in 82 (20.1%) of the 407 schools studied. In 32 cases, the segregation was at the school unit level; 48 school units had class-level segregation; 17 schools had segregation at the building level; and 15 school units had segregation reflected in the spatial arrangement of the seats in the classroom.

### **Why does segregation in public schools in Romania persist over time?**

Based on the statistics presented above, it appears that the school segregation of Roma children in Romania has persisted over time and that their percentage has constantly increased. While in 1998, 12% of schools practiced some type of school segregation of Roma children. In 2002, their rate rose to over 13%. In 2008 we can see a significant increase in the percentage (reaching over 34%) of public school units that implemented such a policy of discrimination against Roma

students. Since the CADO report (2016) only covers public schools in the north-east of Romania, the number of segregated schools with Roma students, in 2016 at the national level, probably exceeded 20%. This likelihood seems to be verified by the IFR (2016) data, which shows that 28% of the responding Roma students in Romania reported that most of their schoolmates were Roma during that time. And the latest IFR report (2022) indicates that 51% of Roma respondents in Romania face school segregation. From this point of view, we can clearly state that the school segregation of Roma children in Romanian public education persists and increases over time.

School segregation has persisted in Romania over time because it is the result of racist and prejudiced manifestations against Roma communities, rather than policy or legislation. School units end up refusing children from this ethnic group due to the lack of interaction and cooperation between the majority population and the Roma community. Non-Roma parents frequently do not enroll their children in schools or classes with a high percentage of Roma children, believing that their presence will have a negative impact on their children. Teachers and school management want to meet the demands of non-Roma parents, even creating separate classes or even buildings dedicated to Roma children (Varga, 2021), despite laws that clearly prohibit this act. Thus, school segregation ends up persisting over time. (Cassisi, 2020, Badescu et al. 2018; Arabadjieva, 2016). Residential segregation is another factor contributing to school segregation, as the segregated residential community tends to overcrowd the nearby school, making it impossible to avoid the school segregation of Roma children.

When done freely, school segregation is not considered an act of discrimination. For a long time in Romania, the Hungarian minority has self-segregated to protect its ethnic identity. In their case, school segregation is a tool they would never give up. When it comes to school segregation, the Roma experience a decline in the quality of education that the Hungarian students does not experience. For example, the facilities are often in a state of disrepair, without heating, lighting or sewage. Teachers feel penalized compared to schools with Hungarian students because they are assigned to classes or school units where the majority of students are Roma. In such situations, the quality of their teaching is poor, so that the training of Roma students automatically suffers. These factors contribute to a high dropout rate and much poorer academic performance. According to the National Roma Integration Strategy (2019), 68% of



Roma children tend to drop out of school early. And only 0.1% of Roma children graduate to the next level of education (Rotaru, 2019).

## **Recommendations**

The study concludes with two recommendations for preventing future school segregation. When discussing the prevention of school segregation, the most critical issue is school monitoring. It is obvious that the problem of segregation is not political but social. The fact that several schools end up practicing a form of segregation is due to the lack of monitoring by the county school inspectorate, proven by the lack of reports. In other words, the county school inspectorate together with a member of the Roma civil society should annually check schools in areas with a large Roma population to ensure the prevention of school segregation.

Roma children from residentially segregated areas are the most vulnerable to the possibility of school segregation. This is owing to the school district, which does not allow children to be registered in another school unit. In this scenario, the answer would be to implement a policy that allows Roma children from such a neighborhood to enroll in another school unit, with the local administration assisting these students by allocating transportation. It would also be beneficial to enlighten Roma parents about the long-term repercussions of school segregation so that they understand why it is critical to enroll their children in mixed classes.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the present study, which uses a qualitative approach, aims to fill a gap in the specialized literature regarding the persistence of school segregation of Roma in the Romanian educational system. Presenting significant arguments about the evolution of this phenomenon over 18 years, wanting to demonstrate that school segregation in Romanian education persists over time. The research has limitations because the statistical data is quite old, the last national report on school segregation is from 2016. However, it provides a picture of the problem of the persistence of school segregation of Roma children and opens some discussions about it that can be deepened in the future.

The current study agrees with the statement that improving access to education is an essential factor in the Roma integration process. As a result, school segregation of Roma children remains a critical problem that is growing, and its consequences endanger the Roma integration process in Romanian society. Although segregation can be used to maintain an ethnic minority's cultural identity, in the case of Roma pupils, it is a form of discrimination that frequently leads to school dropout and poorer academic performance.

In this research it was observed that the prohibition of school segregation of Roma children existed only on paper in Romania, the share of segregated schools increased between 1998 and 2016. First of all, due to racism and stereotypes against the Roma community by school staff and parents - Roma. Second, school segregation can in some cases be considered the result of residential segregation, in such cases, school segregation has persisted over time because the school near the segregated community becomes overpopulated with children from that community.

The recommendations of the study regarding the prevention of school segregation are the following: (1) Involvement of Roma civil society members in school monitoring. (2) Improving the access of Roma children from segregated areas to schools with a mixed population. (3) Roma parents must be informed about the effects of school segregation on the future of the children and the community.

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