Beyond Tuition: Addressing Structural Barriers for Romani Students in Higher Education

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Abstract

This article critically examines the effectiveness of Bulgarian national educational policies in promoting educational equity for marginalised Romani communities. While recent policy shifts toward reducing financial barriers to higher education represent a significant step toward increasing access to higher education, they fall short of addressing the broader structural barriers that hinder the educational advancement of Romani students. These barriers include poverty, limited access to quality education, low academic expectations, cultural biases within educational institutions, and scarce opportunities for academic and career development. Drawing on quantitative analysis of enrolment rates, socio-economic indicators among Romani students, and qualitative insights via document analysis and an examination of stakeholder engagement, this paper explores how the Bulgarian education system continues to reproduce social inequalities, particularly within a neoliberal framework that focuses on meritocracy and individual effort rather than structural factors. The article argues that to effectively challenge these barriers and promote social equity, it is essential to adopt holistic and community-centred approaches that empower Romani communities.

Keywords

- Affirmative action
- Bulgaria
- Higher education
- Institutional racism
- Roma
- Socio-economic inequality

Introduction

Access to higher education provides opportunities not only for the development of individual human capital but also for individual social capital by serving as a gateway to influential forums, granting individuals the opportunity to be heard in the most significant societal arenas. By ensuring equitable educational opportunities for Romani students, governments empower them to participate actively in societal discourse and advocate for their rights and interests (Strike 2006, 185–199). Despite progress in recent years, the participation of Romani students in higher education across Europe remains significantly below that of the general population. In Central and Eastern Europe, about one per cent of Romani youth attain university-level education, compared to much higher national averages. Structural barriers such as poverty, early school leaving, discrimination, and the lack of inclusive support systems continue to limit Romani students' access to and retention in universities (OECD 2020, 18–25). A 2021 survey by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) found that just 22 per cent of young Roma (aged 18–24) had completed upper-secondary education, making progression to higher education exceedingly rare. While some countries have introduced targeted scholarships and affirmative measures, these initiatives remain fragmented and insufficient in addressing the deeply rooted inequalities affecting Romani youth (FRA 2022, 32).

Romani participation in higher education has risen steadily in Bulgaria for the last 15 years, with recently published data indicating that participation rates have now reached 2.6 per cent and even risen to 5.4 per cent for the 21–25 age group (Angelova et al. 2020). For the most part, such patterns mask continued social inequality in access and entry to higher education, while clear socio-economic disparities continue to exist and persist. At the onset of 2024, the Bulgarian government introduced a proposal for the elimination of tuition fees applicable to students and doctoral candidates enrolled at state-funded higher education institutions (voted in the National Assembly, but later dropped). The proposal to abolish university tuition fees may have represented an attempt to increase access to higher education for Romani students, however, it fails to address the broader structural challenges that hinder their educational advancement, such as poverty, limited access to quality education, lower academic expectations, cultural biases within educational institutions and scarce opportunities for academic and career development, and so on.

Access to education, theoretically, is a core part of the legal basis underlying the Bulgarian education system. At the same time, access to education in Bulgaria is not a legally defined concept (Kashamov et al. 2022), which is crucial for a strongly centralised and unprogressive system such as Bulgaria's education system. Numerous factors have a huge impact on a child's poor/high performance at school: in/adequate living conditions (running water, heating, secured housing, among others); in/accessible infrastructure in particular neighbourhoods (streets, sidewalks, street lights, and so forth); in/convenient and/or free/paid school transport (involving walking several kilometres to reach a bus stop); un/available textbooks and school supplies; un/available in/adequate school nutrition; speaking a minority mother tongue in first grade (and respectively, insufficient command of the Bulgarian (instruction) language); and living in a small settlement among others. These factors impact self-perception and prospects but are not regarded and perceived as factors triggering or hindering a child's potential through the access to education paradigm. The reason being that prevalent neoliberal narratives emphasise individual agency over

structural determinants of success (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979). This ethos of competitive individualism and "self-responsibilisation" has shifted liability from the state to the individual student and, as a result, blame for educational underachievement is often placed on the victims of neoliberalism rather than its architects (Reay 2022, 12). Over the years, this ideology, which recognises privilege as merit, has led to a thorough appropriation of meritocratic norms (Littler 2018). Despite the systemic disadvantages faced by Romani students competing for universities with their non-Romani peers, outcomes are often perceived as meritocratic, which reaffirms and further legitimises social hierarchies.

This article bridges critical gaps in understanding the systemic barriers and opportunities shaping Roma's access to higher education in Bulgaria by exploring the intersection of socio-economic disparities, cultural stigmatisation, and educational policies. Moreover, the text provides an analysis that exceeds simplistic narratives of inclusion. It highlights the limitations of neoliberal policy frameworks that often prioritise assimilation over equity in the light of Bulgaria's stratified education system which conserves intergenerational inequalities while applying an limited-impact affirmative action limited in both scope and impact in an attempt to address these same inequalities.

However, beyond identifying challenges, this study offers new knowledge by contextualising the invisible aspects preceding access to education, such as parental educational attainment, early childhood conditions, and institutional ethnocentrism. It enriches the discourse by shedding light on the ways structural inequalities accumulate via cultural marginalisation. Moreover, its emphasis on fostering aspirations through mentorship, role models, and success stories centres this text as a way of rethinking Romani inclusion strategies. By advocating for transformative change through systemic reforms, better teacher training, and targeted policies, it calls for an education system that not only accommodates Romani students but actively values their cultural contributions and nurtures their aspirations.

1. Methodology

The methodology of this study integrates a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative data to explore the intersection of socio-economic disparities and cultural capital within Bulgaria's educational landscape with a focus on the Romani community. This study employs a secondary data analysis approach, drawing on peer-reviewed literature, policy documents, official statistics, and prior empirical research. This facilitates critical synthesis and contributes to the advancement of knowledge by integrating insights from diverse and authoritative materials. To analyse the impact of socio-economic status on academic performance and access to education, quantitative data is drawn from international assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), along with national demographic statistics and educational attainment rates in different ethnic groups. Furthermore, qualitative data is collected through desktop research of a broad array of academic literature, including surveys and interviews with educators, parents, and students, in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of Romani families and the systemic barriers they face. The research emphasises the role of educational content, teacher attitudes, and institutional practices, employing critical discourse analysis to uncover the underlying ethnocentric narratives within Bulgaria's education system. By triangulating these methods and providing a nuanced perspective on

the challenges of, and opportunities for, Romani educational inclusion, the study aims to shed light on the complex dynamics of cultural capital, educational access, and affirmative action. That is to say, how the research aims to fill the existing knowledge vacuum in academic literature on the higher educational integration of Romani communities in Bulgaria.

2. Intersection of Socio-economic Disparities and Cultural Capital in Bulgaria's Educational Landscape

Household income distribution significantly influences people's positions within the social hierarchy, shaping their opportunities for advancement, with wealthier households investing more in their children's education and development. Therefore, a person's position within a social structure largely determines their capabilities and constraints (Bourdieu 1998), with educational systems playing a significant role in perpetuating social and cultural inequalities by establishing hidden connections between academic aptitude and cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. In this regard, it is noteworthy that, according to PISA 2018, the share of academically resilient students (or top-performing disadvantaged students) in Bulgaria is the lowest in Europe, while school segregation is among the highest, with inter-school differences accounting for 54.7 percent of the total variation in student performance (Hristova 2021, 235). Parents' socio-economic status (differences and inadequate home conditions) can manifest in children's abilities even before they go to school and hinder their consistent engagement in education later on, resulting in opportunity inequality and increased risk of future poverty (Institute for Market Economics 2021). Hence, it is no surprise that, according to PISA, parental socio-economic status and ethnicity continue to be primary determinants of student achievements (OECD 2019). Partially because of Bulgaria's schooling system's failure to effectively address inequalities and provide equitable conditions for all students, it is evident that the lower economic activity among parents of Romani students places them in a more vulnerable position compared to their mainstream counterparts. It becomes evident that the education system not only perpetuates existing disparities but also validates cultural heritage as a natural endowment, reinforcing the status quo (Bourdieu 2018).

Data also indicates that Romani students' parents have significantly lower rates of finishing at least lower secondary education (64 per cent) compared to mainstream students' parents (79 per cent), with economically inactive parents of Romani students having, on average, a lower level of formal education in comparison with economically active ones, and this is true for both mothers and fathers (Garaz 2014). While the direct relationship between parents' educational attainment and that of their children may not be unequivocal, numerous researchers contend that parental education significantly predicts their offspring's educational achievements (Dubow et al. 2009), with socio-economic background of tertiary-level students being commonly evaluated through an examination of their parents' level of formal education. Empirical evidence across various European countries supports this assertion, indicating a correlation between parents' educational attainment and that of their children (Eurostudent IV 2011). In this regard, *cultural capital*, within the context of Bulgaria's educational landscape, emerges as a critical family-based asset that significantly influences intergenerational educational probabilities, particularly impacting a marginalised Romani community.

3. Multiple Invisible Dimensions Preceding Access to Formal Education

In 2022, the highest relative share of impoverished people in Bulgaria was found in individuals who self-identified with the Romani ethnic group, at 63.2 per cent. About 25.9 per cent of children aged 0–17 in Bulgaria were at risk of poverty, with 43.5 per cent of children living in conditions of material deprivation also at risk of poverty. The extent to which children's needs are met varies significantly by ethnicity. Among Bulgarian children, 23 per cent experience limitations in meeting certain needs, compared to 33 per cent of Turkish children and 76.2 per cent of Romani children. Additionally, a complete inability to meet any needs, as defined by restrictions across all thirteen indicators (total multiple deprivation), affects 1.2 per cent of Bulgarian children, 0.8 per cent of Turkish children, and 9.0 per cent of Romani children. About 24 per cent of children living in conditions of material deprivation from the majority Bulgarian ethnic group are also at risk of poverty. For other groups, the relative share is as follows: 37.5 per cent for children from the Turkish ethnic group, and 69.4 per cent for children from the Romani ethnic group (NSI 2022). The difference in living conditions between Romani children and their peers from other ethnic groups is drastic.

The reality of prejudice and dominant stereotyping of the Romani community in the educational environment also result in limiting access to education. Unfounded statements, such as "This is how they are," "This is their culture," "This is not part of their values," "This is their limit," and so forth, contribute to institutional bias, also reflected in professional pedagogical practices. The uniformity of the educational environment and the neglect of children's need for self-recognition arise from the perception that factors such as ethnicity, community culture, language, and socio-economic background do not influence children's attitudes toward education or impact their starting point. The marked discriminatory attitudes and bias about Bulgarian Roma, as well as widespread race-based hate speech are major obstacles to equal access to education, hindering acceptance of Romani children into an ethnically desegregated educational environment, including kindergartens (Pamporov and Angelov 2020). Conclusions drawn from a survey on teachers' attitudes to Roma raised serious concerns, with a disturbingly large group of teachers exhibiting discriminatory attitudes. According to nearly half of the surveyed teachers (47 per cent), Romani children face significant challenges in integration, while one quarter (25.4 per cent) believe they should be educated separately from their Bulgarian peers. Close to one-fifth (19.5 per cent) also believe that children of different ethnic backgrounds possess different cognitive abilities (Commission for Protection against Discrimination 2011). Such beliefs are often reflected in inefficient pedagogical practices both at individual and system levels (Lambrev et al. 2020). This is associated with low levels of engagement (cognitive, behavioural, emotional) and low self-assessment, namely among Romani children (Hristova et al. 2020). The performance of Romani students in national assessments, together with the outcomes of Romani pupils in international testing, should not be viewed as neutral indicators of ability. Rather, they are symptomatic of the broader structural conditions within the education system – conditions that either enable or constrain the acquisition of knowledge and skills (Isaev 2023).

In Bulgaria, learning content does not feature "significant adult(s)" to Romani children from the very beginning of school. Textbooks in history, literature and geography and economics, for example, do not

contain information related to, not only, Romani children but to all children from minority communities (Spielhaus et al. 2020). It is hardly a coincidence that this results in limited prospects for development and fulfilment, as well as questioning the existence of their own primary identity and the respective minority as a group. Research suggests that Romani communities are often portrayed in ways that lack successful, relatable role models (Commission for Protection against Discrimination 2011). It is worth considering whether this reflects a true absence of role models or a failure to recognise and promote them within mainstream discourse. This further reinforces the fact that, despite substantial contributions by Roma to the establishment and development of the Third Bulgarian State from its inception to the present, their role remains predominantly unrecognised (Marushiakova et al. 2023), especially in history and literature. Generally, the narrative about Roma (often when out-of-class projects are assigned) runs along the lines of: they are funny, merry, happy-go-lucky, unruly (Bahníčková 2014), cunning, and sometimes rather remote and even unreal. These are images with which a Romani child barely associates as they do not feature in their primary environment. However, "stories matter… stories can also be used to empower and to humanise. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity. How they are told, whose name and voice are behind the story. What context they are told in. How many stories are told, and son" (Adichie 2009). According to Adichie, all of this is dependent on power. In most cases, the story of a minority is being written and told by a majority, which holds the power. And a majority, no matter who it is, is prone to render the narrative about itself as positive and, often, to describe a minority in negative terms (Adichie 2009). Additionally, stereotypes allow one narrative as the only perspective, further consolidated by systemic ethnocentrism.

Ethnocentrism is an established phenomenon in the Bulgarian education system. As early as 2004:

> The use of the word "Bulgarian" […] tips the balance to the development of an ethnocentric approach in the way topics are presented in school. […] The accent of the curricula can leave students with the impression that there is a single ethnic and religious group in Bulgarian society: Bulgarians and Orthodox Christians […] The underestimation of the achievements of individuals from other ethnic groups in Bulgarian society, when presenting the multifaceted social reality, is most striking in the presentation at national level of Bulgaria's contribution to world culture, without considering the achievements of the representatives of ethnic communities, such as Turks, Roma, Jews, Armenians and Russians (Totseva et al. 2005, 87–88).

Attitudes to every child's first language is also of crucial importance since it makes up their burgeoning identity. Every child discovers the world through their first language (mother tongue, family tongue). If a child senses a belittling or denial of their community's language and culture, there is great risk that they will fail to integrate, since s/he is ready to acquire new knowledge and skills mainly in their mother tongue, through cultural communication models, community philosophy, and so forth, which the child has internalised during the primary socialisation by their family and neighbourhood. The Bulgarian education system is far more appreciative of students whose mother tongue is Bulgarian than Romanes or Turkish and who benefit very little from their time at school (Downes et al. 2017). The general linguistic attitude plays an important role here, whereby the promotion of multilingualism was reduced to "promoting the learning of Bulgarian" to minority children, who are expected, as indigenous citizens

of Bulgaria, to know the national language – and their parents should teach them to speak it. In addition, there is a linguistic-ideological attitude that some languages are less important than others. Moreover, there are earlier preconceptions against preschool foreign-language teaching for children who grew up communicating in one language, in other words, "not to confuse the child" (Angelova 2018, 32). The data from Bulgaria's last census (2021) reveals unequivocally the gap in long-term educational achievements among the various language and ethnic groups in society (Baev 2023). PISA results reveal that Bulgaria fails to compensate for the negative impact of students' social and economic family environment (this group includes not only poor students but also students whose first language is not Bulgarian or who belong to ethnic minorities). According to an OECD report (2023), Bulgaria is one of only 10 countries in the survey where at least half of the achievement gap is explained by differences among schools. Additionally, the success of students from prestigious secondary schools is based on private lessons the students take, not on the approaches, efforts, and so forth of the teachers in the schools where they are enrolled (Yordanova 2023).

The fact that the Romani language has not been taught for years in Bulgarian schools is made light of. It is claimed that no requests to this effect are submitted by Romani parents (even in fully segregated schools). However, even if there were such applications, the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) or respective schools are unable to provide a Romani-language teacher since no Bulgarian university[1] nor educational institution currently offers such a specialisation or further education qualification (Ministry of Education and Science 2018). Hristo Kyuchukov (2018) examines the establishment and closure of the Primary School Pedagogy and Romani Language specialty at the University of Veliko Tarnovo St. Cyril and St. Methodius as a case of systemic discrimination against Roma in Bulgarian higher education. Founded in 2003–2004 to provide academic training in Romani language and culture, the programme achieved significant success, graduating 54 students with high academic marks and fostering international collaborations. However, Kyuchukov argues that institutional racism, political interference, and academic opposition led to its closure in 2010. He contends that the National Accreditation Agency's negative assessment was based on racial bias rather than academic merit, and that resistance extended beyond academia to include certain Romani activists. Political actors further weaponised the issue for electoral and institutional purposes. Despite the Commission for Protection against Discrimination (CPD) identifying procedural violations, Bulgarian courts and the European Court of Human Rights failed to recognise the discrimination.

The statistics show that between 25–30 per cent of young children entering their first year in Bulgaria's school system have mother tongues different from Bulgarian (Georgieva 2019). They come mostly from Bulgaria's Roma and also from other language minority communities. Given this language disadvantage at such an early age, many of these vulnerable children do not make it to middle school, much less high school. In the case of Roma, the total enrolment rate to secondary education is 57 per cent while this ratio is 87 per cent for the general population in Bulgaria (FRA 2016). As of 2019, 22.7 per cent of Roma have

1 From 2004 to 2009, there was a special stream in Elementary School Pedagogy in Romani Language available at Veliko Tarnovo University. It was closed by the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency. Currently, no university offers special Elementary School Pedagogy in Romani Language.

graduated from high school and 2.6 per cent from university. This represents a significant increase from the previous decade (as for 2011, respectively – 13.5 per cent and 0.4 per cent) (Angelova et al. 2020), but there is still a way to go to narrow the educational gap. As of 2021, the average for the whole country is 54 per cent high school graduation and 29 per cent university graduates (Regional Profiles 2021).

A significant percentage of twelfth-graders in Bulgaria face challenges graduating from high school, which involves successfully passing state exams on Bulgarian language and literature, as well as in a second subject. More than 17 per cent (more than 8,000 students) of twelfth-graders achieved low marks in the last state exam in Bulgarian language and literature, after the 2022/2023 school year. The share of students with low marks was similar to previous school years and is increasing every year. Additionally, geographic variance in the quality of the education provided by primary and secondary, including vocational schools, is very high, with schools in smaller towns and villages and less populated areas unable to attract high-quality teaching staff. Many young Roma face serious difficulties in mastering school material due to the poor quality of their prior education. Substantial differences persist in performance at state exams in Bulgarian language and literature among students from different types of schools. Students graduating from vocational and sports schools have significantly lower average results compared to those from prestigious high schools. Not least, the percentage of students in schools with a concentration of students of Romani origin is increasing – almost every second child/youth from the Romani ethnic origin is enrolled in a school where Roma predominate (Lambrev et al. 2020).

The Bulgarian National Strategy for Equality, Inclusion, and Participation of Roma (2021–2030) outlines a range of education policies aimed at addressing educational disparities faced by Romani students, including measures to improve early childhood education access, enhance inclusive and intercultural education, and support Romani students in transitioning through primary, secondary, and higher education. Key policies include the professional development of educational mediators who work to bridge gaps between Romani communities and schools, and preparatory courses for Romani candidates pursuing university degrees in pedagogy to increase representation in the teaching profession. However, while these initiatives are positive, the strategy lacks specific, measurable targets to assess progress effectively, often framing goals in broad terms without sufficient accountability mechanisms (Government of the Republic of Bulgaria 2021). Notably, the strategy's focus on higher education is limited to the professional development of educational mediators, rather than targeting the broader Romani population. This exclusive focus on the teaching profession overlooks the potential for broader access to higher education across various academic disciplines for Romani students. Moreover, the strategy's emphasis on "continuing education" and vocational pathways does not fully address systemic inequalities in primary and secondary education, where high dropout rates among Romani students persist. This focus on vocational over academic routes may unintentionally perpetuate educational segregation, limiting Romani students' access to the broader labour market. Overall, despite its ambition, the strategy risks falling short without more adequate monitoring, a deeper emphasis on reducing early educational disparities, and clear pathways for Romani students into diverse fields of higher education.

Comparative insights from other Central and Eastern European countries could provide valuable lessons, for example, Hungary's scholarship programmes for Romani students and Serbia's affirmative action

policies in university admissions. These offer more targeted approaches to higher education inclusion and demonstrate that explicitly addressing barriers to higher education can lead to improvements in participation rates. In contrast, Bulgaria's strategy remains largely aspirational, without sufficient mechanisms to ensure implementation or accountability.

4. A Systemic Perspective on the Pathways to Romani Access to Higher Education

The issue of Romani access to higher education is deeply intertwined with broader systemic challenges. Despite efforts across Europe to address these barriers, research consistently reveals gaps in both the design and implementation of educational policies. A recurring theme is the tension between neoliberal policy frameworks, which prioritise economic outcomes and market-driven approaches, and genuine inclusion, which demands structural changes to dismantle deep-rooted inequalities. For example, Leyton (2020) critiques EU inclusion policies for their focus on economic utility rather than equity, arguing that such frameworks often perpetuate a biopolitical model that assigns Roma to predefined economic roles without addressing the systemic exclusion they face. Similarly, Themelis (2020) underscores how globalisation-driven higher education systems pressure Romani students to assimilate into mainstream academic norms, sidelining their identities and cultural contributions.

Central to the discussion is the concept of epistemic inclusion, which advocates for recognising Romani students not merely as recipients of education but as active contributors to knowledge production. Morley (2020) challenges deficit-based narratives that frame Romani communities solely through the lens of deprivation and marginalisation, calling for educational systems that affirm Romani resilience and cultural strengths. This shift is particularly crucial in countering stereotypes and fostering environments where Romani students can thrive without compromising their identities. Comparative research highlights effective practices in other European contexts. For instance, Gkofa (2020) identifies family support and mentorship as critical factors in the success of Romani students in Greece, while Jovanovic (Matache et al. 2020) points to Serbia's struggles in bridging access gaps due to systemic socio-economic inequalities. These studies underscore the importance of targeted interventions such as mentorship programmes, anti-discrimination training for educators, and community-driven initiatives to support Romani students' academic journeys.

Building on these insights, Garaz and Torotcoi (2017) draw attention to the stark underrepresentation of Romani students in STEM fields, linking this disciplinary gap to unequal employment outcomes and limited socio-economic mobility. Their work underscores the need for interventions that not only increase access but also diversify Romani students' academic and professional opportunities. Meanwhile, Pecak and Torotcoi (2019) explore the impact of antigypsyism on Romani educational aspirations, emphasising the critical role of family and community support in fostering resilience against systemic discrimination, while Gologan, Kurysheva, and Torotcoi (2020) advocate for integrated measures combining financial assistance with mentorship and counselling, demonstrating the importance of holistic, context-sensitive approaches to reducing educational inequities.

As evidenced both here and daily within Bulgaria's education system, singular measures are insufficient without broader systemic reforms. In this regard, early education, often marked by segregated schooling and high dropout rates, must be a focal point to ensure that Romani students have the foundation needed to pursue higher education. Mirga and Redzepi (2020) emphasise that addressing these foundational disparities is critical to breaking the cycle of exclusion that Romani students face across generations. Lessons from Spain's inclusion plans (Padilla-Carmona et al. 2020), which blend systemic reforms with targeted support, or the Nordic countries' policy silences on Roma in higher education (Helakorpi and Isopahkala-Bouret 2020) illustrate the need for policies that balance inclusive rhetoric with tangible, equity-driven actions.

Ultimately, fostering Romani access to higher education requires a multifaceted approach that integrates structural reforms, targeted interventions, and the recognition of Romani voices in shaping policies. As Roberts (2020) argues, empowering Roma as knowledge producers not only addresses biases in academia but also enhances the transformative potential of higher education as a pathway to equity and social mobility. Bulgaria's policies could benefit from such an approach, incorporating mentorship, systemic accountability, and active participation of Roma in shaping and implementing educational reforms.

5. Affirmative Action in Education: Challenges and Opportunities for Romani Educational Inclusion

Affirmative action, guided by the principle of liberal egalitarianism, exemplifies the belief that addressing inequalities is essential for maximising the position of the most disadvantaged within a society and, as an approach, acknowledges that treating individuals as equals does not always mean providing identical treatment (Moses 2006, 567–586), particularly in contexts marked by historical oppression (Detchev 2024) and social disparities.

Targeted educational support for Romani students addresses historical discrimination and exclusion faced by Roma, while simultaneously aiming to remedy present-day social injustices and structural disparities when it comes to accessing opportunities and resources. Moreover, by prioritising Romani individuals, who have historically been excluded from these various societal dynamics, affirmative action aims to promote social cohesion by addressing systemic injustices in the distribution of social rewards (Pantea 2015, 896–914).

In Bulgaria, the discourse surrounding affirmative action is complex, with advocates for colour-blind educational policies arguing against what they perceive as government-sponsored discrimination and invoking national legislation that prohibits discrimination in all forms. However, the Bulgarian Protection against Discrimination Act states that "special measures aimed at equalising opportunities for individuals or groups of individuals in disadvantaged positions based on the characteristics listed in Article 7, paragraph 1 (including gender, race, ethnic origin, descent, religion, education, and so forth.) are not considered discriminatory, as long as these measures are necessary" (Law for Protection against Discrimination 2003). Additionally, there are objections asserting that affirmative action contradicts

meritocratic principles and violates highly respected values such as self-reliance, individualism, discipline, and hard work, labelling it as "modern racism" (Pantea 2015, 896–914).

The Roma Education Fund (REF) is a nongovernmental organisation dedicated to advancing education opportunities for Roma, serving as a landmark in the downfall of affirmative action in Bulgaria. It was created in 2005 within the framework of the Decade of Roma Inclusion, aiming to provide Roma with access to quality education. Its initiatives spanned pre-primary, primary, and secondary education levels, complemented by four scholarship programmes tailored for ethnic Roma enrolled in higher education across Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe, as well as Turkey. Annually, REF received approximately 2,500 scholarship applications, admitting up to 1,500 recipients based on academic criteria and predetermined country quotas. These quotas considered factors such as scholarship demand, existing alternative programmes, and the Romani population within each country relative to the broader region (REF 2012). Scholarship support from REF primarily covered tuition fees and offers a stipend for living expenses, supplemented by access to a national alumni e-community facilitating communication among former and current beneficiaries. Furthermore, select students received additional financial assistance for conferences, language courses, trainings, and small-scale community development projects.

In Bulgaria, the Roma Education Fund and the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) provided monthly stipends to 763 Romani adolescents enrolled in secondary education between 2016 and 2018, reflecting the systemic barriers that continue to hinder equitable access to schooling.. However, the scholarship initiative faced scrutiny due to alleged discriminatory practices and consequently legal challenges arose, initiated by the Bulgarian association Azbukari, arguing that the scholarships discriminated against non-Romani Bulgarian children. This contention led to a protracted legal battle, started as a lawsuit filed at the Commission for Protection against Discrimination and culminating in a Supreme Administrative Court ruling affirming claims of discrimination.[2] Throughout the proceedings, the initiative was defended by a former Bulgarian Minister of Education, who described it as vital support for high school students facing socio-economic barriers. Nonetheless, the Supreme Administrative Court of Bulgaria upheld the discrimination verdict due to concerns over equal treatment and adherence to anti-discrimination laws (MoES 2018).

Moreover, concerns have been raised regarding the effectiveness of affirmative action measures for Roma, particularly regarding their ability to reach the most marginalised segments of the population. To determine whether affirmative action has the capacity to reach the most disadvantaged Roma, one needs to delve deeper into socio-economic disparities and compare the degree of involvement in economic activities of Romani students' parents with those of the broader Romani population in Bulgaria, which could provide insight into the backgrounds of Roma most affected by high unemployment rates. Such a

2 Commission for Protection against Discrimination is a Bulgarian national independent specialised quasi-judicial body for the prevention of discrimination, protection against discrimination, and implementation of a state policy of equal opportunities and equal treatment of all citizens in the Republic of Bulgaria. It was established during the EU accession period and serves as an equality body which promotes equal treatment by providing independent assistance to victims of discrimination, conducting independent surveys, publishing independent reports, and making recommendations on matters relating to discrimination. It was first established by the Racial Equality Directive (2000/43/EC).

comparison indicates that the former demonstrate higher levels of economic engagement. Furthermore, gender disparities in economic participation are more pronounced within the general Romani population than among the parents of Romani students. The contrast is particularly striking in terms of gender and parental status: 66 per cent of mothers of Romani students are employed, compared to just 20 per cent of Romani women in the same age group more broadly. Similarly, 63 per cent of fathers of Romani students are economically active, while only 27 per cent of Romani men overall participate in the labour force (Garaz 2014). These figures reveal a notable socio-economic differentiation within the Romani community – particularly in relation to families engaged with higher education – which raises important questions about who is actually being reached by educational and employment-related policies.

In regard to the ratio of Romani students' parents with at least a secondary education against the ratio of the general Romani population, the findings again indicate a significant disparity: Romani university students' parents exhibit considerably higher levels of formal education compared to the general Romani population in Bulgaria, with 64 per cent of Romani students' parents having completed lower secondary education (Key Stage 4 in the United Kingdom), contrasting with 10 per cent of their counterparts (Pantea 2015, 896–914).

REF data confirms the mainstream perception that affirmative action often benefits solely the more economically privileged within disadvantaged communities (*Ibid.*). Despite this, the data also reveals that supported Romani students encounter significant socio-economic barriers compared to both mainstream students and the general population which, in turn, highlights the need for targeted support in facilitating their access to and retention in higher education, as they continue to struggle with factors such as lower parental economic activity and education levels.

Affirmative action has a great potential to cultivate a critical mass from within a disadvantaged group, particularly among those who possess greater economic, social, and cultural capital which, in turn, puts them in a better position to leverage the initiatives they have been a part of and advocate for their community's causes. These individuals can serve as critical agents of change (Garaz 2014, 295–311) within their communities, advocating for their rights and challenging negative stereotypes through their professional trajectories, as they become valuable social capital for their less fortunate peers and as a gateway to addressing systemic barriers to inclusion.

6. Free Does Not Always Mean Affordable or Accessible

Educational stratification and disparities in professional achievement are pronounced and reflected within Bulgarian schools, mirroring broader societal inequalities, the harsh reality of which is that social mobility remains out of reach for many, evidence of the role of the education system in entrenching privilege and meritocracy's failure to address structural inequalities (Institute of Market Economics 2016). Economic hurdles are just one aspect of a multi-dimensional spectrum of issues impeding the inclusion of underprivileged groups in post-secondary schooling. Therefore, efforts must go beyond easing monetary hardships and centre also on inspiring and advising those at risk. To connect universities with secondary institutions, attended predominantly by marginalised pupils, an initiative might need to present practical

approaches, such as establishing transitional schemes, engaging in community involvement initiatives, or organising summer programmes.

In the last decade, admissions to most state universities in Bulgaria have gone against all market and academic logic. The idea and privilege of being a student and belonging to an academic community has undergone a transformation. As of 2023, out of 415,472 vacant places, there were 200,871 places taken by university students in Bulgaria (Rumenova 2023). This means that 52 per cent of student places remain vacant, despite drastically lowered enrolment criteria for most degrees. This inevitably leads to a significant decrease in the quality of education: poorly developed skills and little knowledge of future professions.[3] Students also share the defeatist acceptance by teachers that graduates will choose to move abroad for professional employment.[4] This leads to a stated lack of desire on the part of teachers to train quality experts and undermines the motivation of students who have consciously selected their future professions.

Additionally, very often Roma graduating from university are portrayed as an exception, which leads to false internalisations among prospective Romani students that "University is not valued by Roma, and I cannot afford it because I am Roma." Educational attainment among Romani individuals aged 21–25 exceeds that of the broader Romani population, indicating modest intergenerational educational progress. Within this younger cohort, 5.4 per cent have attained a higher education qualification – defined as either a two-year or four-year post-secondary degree – while 35 per cent have completed upper secondary education. In comparison, only 2.6 per cent of the overall Romani population possess a higher education degree, and 23 per cent have completed secondary education (Angelova et al. 2020). These disparities suggest a positive, though limited, trend toward increased educational participation among younger Roma. Nevertheless, the attainment levels remain markedly lower than national averages, underscoring enduring structural barriers to equitable access and completion in both secondary and tertiary education.

Tuition fees are only one small aspect of access to higher education. The root of accessibility to higher education, however, is buried in primary, and subsequently, in secondary schools. Children from poorer families, who often happen to be children from Romani families, attend schools that are partially or completely segregated (city segregated schools or rural segregated schools). Segregated schools often push kids from grade to grade with huge educational gaps that pile up each year. The results from external assessments or state matriculation exams are notably low (for example, about 10 points in Bulgarian language and Mathematics, when the threshold is 29 points). In the last few years, poor grades in matriculation exams in Bulgarian language and literature have risen steadily. The results of the matriculation exams, on the one hand, verify the receipt of a secondary education diploma and, on the other hand, act as entry to various tertiary schools. There is a steep trend in a lack of basic knowledge and skills in secondary school graduates and university entrants. This trend is also found among university graduates. The student who achieved the best result at the matriculation exams in the summer of 2023, publicly acknowledged that from fifth grade to twelfth grade she had attended private lessons (Kostova

3 In the 2023 Times Higher Education World University Rankings, only two out of 52 Bulgarian higher education institutions managed to secure a spot: https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2023/world-ranking.

4 TSA's experience under the project "Mentoring Support for Students of Romani Origin Studying Health Specialties".

2023). We can conclude that the educational system requires more from students than it provides – this gap is expected to be covered by students and their families.

The low results in matriculation exams also determine the trajectory in higher education. Is it because students will apply for a better-quality university, as well as greater competition for places, or universities recruiting students with tempting offers? If a student wishes to pursue medicine, they must take private lessons in biology and chemistry from the ninth grade.[5] Usually, only youngsters from medical families or high-income earners can afford this investment. Financial independence creates conditions for students to focus fully on their studies.[6] However, targeted remedial classes funded under specific programmes can enhance preparation for national exams (especially in remote or marginalised settlements), while bettering students' performance relative to their local schools can identify potential candidates initially overlooked by national assessments. Students from poor families who receive targeted support for vocational education and training (despite the gaps they had in the secondary education stage) graduate with high marks and enter their first-choice university.[7]

7. Cultivating Aspirations beyond Stereotypes

Policies in education often are subordinated to the labour market and business, which is not necessarily wrong. However, market engagement and entrepreneurship should be the effect, and not the goal, of education systems. According to Andreas Schleicher, OECD Director of Education and Skills, "potential talent is being wasted because children as young as seven already assume their gender, ethnicity or social background restricts their job or life choices – including stereotypes about science and engineering careers being better suited to men". Primary pupils need "light bulb moments" about their future from the time they start school – otherwise their horizons risk being limited to what their parents or carers do, what their teachers advise, or what they see on TV, films, or social media. By the age of seven, children are already facing limits on their future aspirations in work, according to a report from the OECD (Schleicher et al. 2019).

Primary pupils need access to inspiring role models from a full range of industries, professions, and sectors, if society and economy are to harness the full potential of the next generation – and here we will repeat the philosophy of the American children's rights activist Marion Wright Edelman that, "You can't be what you can't see" (Education and Employers 2019). In recent years, role models and success

5 In the last year, TSA resumed preparatory courses for applying to medical universities for more than 20 Romani youth and high school students wishing to join the competition for admission to the specialties of medicine, pharmacy, and dentistry. Without this intensive and high-quality training provided by Professor Turnev's team, some of these young people would only dream of the medical professions, let alone be able to enter medical universities.

6 Observed within TSA's "Scholarship Support for Romani Students Enrolled in Medical Studies". All scholarship students successfully complete the academic year and continue to a higher course. Rather, it is an exception for someone not to finish the academic year or to repeat the year.

7 This is shown by the results of the "Terni Zor: Comprehensive Support for Young Roma for Access to University" project, which the Trust for Social Achievement (TSA) Foundation has been supporting for over a decade.

stories are seen as a spark that can ignite the potential of any young Romani person. The key question is how this tool for learning and inspiration is used to utilise aspirations for higher education among Romani youth. Very often, in these sugar-coated, abbreviated stories, the difficulties, unknowns, and failures of the initial start-up are absent. Therefore, these narratives often feel unreal and detached from the everyday realities of young people – especially when they dare to follow the same path and discover that many of the hardships and setbacks have been conveniently left out. This perpetuates the illusion of a seamless path to success, reinforcing meritocratic notions and overlooking the systemic barriers faced by marginalised communities. Bringing success stories and role models to real life – telling them realistically – contextualises young people's aspirations and dreams. On this path, mentoring (and tutoring) can help unlock the potential of young people who come from smaller settlements or poor families. Once enrolled, these students might receive mentoring support, vital for students transitioning from different educational backgrounds, especially those for whom university was not considered previously. This helps promote their adaptation, their academic achievements, and even contributes to building a sense of belonging to a new community and environment.[8]

The uncertainty of what comes next after young people graduate from university is no less important. The most critical aspect of this measure is the elimination of semester tuition fees without a clear strategic vision for training future professionals to address the shortage of key specialists in small towns. Comprehensive financial and academic support could be laid on for future teachers, doctors, and other key professionals – for instance, with the provision that they return to work in their localities. Outside the big cities, there is an acute shortage of health professionals and teachers (Employment Agency 2024). A large proportion of teachers are of pre-retirement age. Many health professionals leave the country after graduation because of a lack of employment opportunities. Geographical areas with an acute shortage of teachers and health professionals would be among the most welcoming professional and personal places for young people if they could find the right conditions for social and professional life there. If there is predictability and certainty, prosperity will come slowly but surely. For this purpose, young people need a credible narrative about why they should stay, a scenario in which they feel supported, understood, and can constantly learn and contribute.[9]

After university graduation, a glass ceiling often limits the opportunities of even highly-qualified Romani professionals to occupy semi-professional roles and becoming a mediator (health, labour, educational, and so on) are sometimes the only options for them. Roma are underrepresented in STEM fields (Garaz and Torotcoi 2017). Furthermore, in many *de facto* segregated schools – with a high share of Romani student and in Romani neighbourhoods – there are no employed teachers of Romani origin. But there are Roma among non-teaching service staff. In one of his public statements the anthropologist and researcher Haralan Aleksandrov states (DW 2013) the following: "I know talented and capable Romani youth who were enrolled in integration programmes at prestigious English-language universities,

8 Reported and observed in TSA's initiative "Romani Opportunities for Leadership, Education, and Success" and the "Young Romani Teachers" initiative.

9 "Young Romani Teachers" is an initiative of the TSA, which is focused precisely on this aspect of education and the realisation of young people.

such as the American University in Blagoevgrad. None of the participants in these programmes not only did not return to their communities, but many did not even remain in Bulgaria." These kinds of utopian expectations exist mainly for Romani higher education graduates in Bulgaria – to return to their communities and bring/make the change, to take power into their own hands. This type of expectation is verbalised publicly mainly toward Romani youth. This extra expectation becomes a further future barrier and impacts the self-prospects of Romani students with aspirations in higher education.

Although some graduates in big cities manage to find high paying jobs without having higher education, the added value of university studies comes from the social environment/networks and the connections students make. Undoubtedly, there is a visible, marked correlation among income from contacts, degrees, contacts, and social and life skills that students gain during their studies. Admission to university is a transformative journey that not only provides numerous opportunities to acquire social and cultural capital but also unlocks new pathways to personal and professional growth.

Conclusions

The challenges faced by Romani children in accessing quality education in Bulgaria are multifaceted, encompassing a plethora of factors such as discrimination, institutional bias, and poverty. Despite continuous efforts to improve educational outcomes, the persistent obstacles Romani students face, such as inadequate living conditions, limited access to resources, and linguistic inequality, continue to hinder their educational attainment.

In order for policymakers to tackle these complex issues and structural barriers, as well as create an environment for Romani children to thrive academically, comprehensive and multisectoral national reforms, including the implementation of inclusive policies, community involvement initiatives, and efforts to combat prejudices and stereotypes, are needed.

Overall support for university studies can be differentiated according to students' socio-economic status and academic achievements, but also according to their personal experience as part of a particular minority, subject to discrimination and exclusion. Furthermore, addressing the educational disparities faced by Romani students requires the implementation of tailored support systems, encompassing various measures and instruments such as financial assistance programmes, mentorship, academic tutoring, and cultural sensitivity training for educators.

Not least, the active involvement of Romani communities in the design and implementation of educational policies is also crucial. Empowering Romani stakeholders to participate in decision-making processes ensures that policies are better informed and more responsive to the unique needs of Romani students, whilst this collaborative approach simultaneously fosters a sense of ownership and agency within Romani communities, leading to more sustainable and impactful interventions.

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