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Policy monitoring and power hierarchies in Hungarian Roma integration:

The Roma Civil Monitor, the Hungarian government and the European Commission

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the hierarchical power relations and governance structures shaping Roma policy monitoring in Hungary, focusing on the interactions between civil society organizations (CSOs), the Hungarian government, and the European Commission (EC). It situates the Hungarian National Strategy for Roma Integration (NSRI) within broader EU frameworks and evaluates the Roma Civil Monitor as a case study of civil society involvement in policy oversight. Drawing on theories of hierarchical governance, multilevel governance (MLG), Europeanization, and Nancy Fraser's justice framework, the study investigates the power asymmetries embedded in Roma policy monitoring. It employs a dual methodology: meta-content analysis of EC and RCM reports, and qualitative interviews with experts involved in Roma monitoring. The findings show that while EU frameworks provide formal spaces for civil society participation, national political dynamics undermine the transformative potential of Roma inclusion strategies. Within this dynamic, the RCM produces critical analysis but is largely disempowered by political pressure. This is exacerbated by the European Commission, whose standardized monitoring approach lacks the contextual depth required to challenge the government effectively. This paper contributes to understanding how supranational and local monitoring mechanisms interact within hierarchical structures and argues for stronger accountability and Roma-led participation in shaping inclusive and justice-oriented policies.

Keywords: *Hierarchy, Civil Society, Monitoring, Public Policy, European Commission, Roma*

1 Introduction

This paper endeavors to dissect the intricate interplay between Roma civil society, Hungarian policy frameworks, and European Union (EU) mechanisms. Focusing on the impact of the evaluation reports of the Hungarian National Strategy for Roma Integration on Hungarian Roma policy, the article scrutinizes the consequences of the Roma Civil Monitoring (RCM) Report and the EC Report on the Hungarian government.

The Roma are estimated to number six million people in the EU and represent one of Europe's most marginalized minority groups. The effectiveness of the European Union in addressing issues of Roma exclusion rests upon the efficacy of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), a policy that will be discussed in this paper.

Matache (2017) has argued that the social policies employed by Hungary regarding the Roma have reinforced pejorative attitudes toward the need to assimilate the Roma and thus have worsened the power imbalance. While Hungary often showcases its minority policies as model examples for neighboring countries, the approach consistently excludes Roma concerns. Instead, the state continues to promote shallow and untargeted policies for Roma integration, with little to no emphasis on raising awareness among the majority population. This paper, therefore, aims to unpack the disconnect between Hungary's domestic approach and broader EU expectations.

The progress of Roma inclusion is 'too little and too slow,' as the poverty rate of the Roma has been stagnant since 2016. Four out of five Roma are at risk of poverty, every second Roma is currently living in housing deprivation without sanitation facilities, and four out of five Roma live in overcrowded households.[1] Ryder et al. (2020) explain this as being the result of spatial, social, and economic exclusion, as well as environmental racism, which has confined the Roma to ghetto communities. In 2022, the FRA published this data to provide a baseline for EU Member States to measure the effectiveness of their 2011 National Roma Integration Strategies. *In Hungary, 77 per cent of the Roma population is at risk of poverty, 28 per cent live in severe material deprivation, and 44 per cent study in segregated schools.*[2]

The 2011 EU NSRI was one of the major responses to Roma exclusion. The strategy package was inspired by the goals and plans of the Decade of Roma Inclusion and served as the foundation for the Hungarian framework, which was adopted by the Hungarian government in December 2011 (Rostas, 2019). The strategy framework is based on a governance model known as the OMC. This model stipulates that peer pressure can mobilize Member States to work towards common goals; however, in the end, the content of the NSRI is based on the political will of the state, and the obligations are based on peer pressure (Ryder et al., 2020). In this respect, the OMC is a soft instrument. It also places emphasis on civil society involvement and community participation.

The structure of this paper unfolds as follows. First, it offers a conceptual introduction to hierarchy, exploring how top-down approaches and shrinking civil society space affect Roma participation in policy. This section also introduces the hierarchical positioning between CSOs, the Hungarian government, and the EC. The discussion then moves to multilevel governance and Europeanization as analytical frameworks for understanding policy implementation. It concludes with a reflection on justice and representation, drawing on Nancy Fraser's theoretical contributions. Next, the paper briefly presents the NSRI's background, along with that of the Roma Civil Monitor – a coalition of NGOs tasked with evaluating the strategy.

Following this conceptual groundwork, the methodology section outlines the qualitative design of the research. The subsequent analysis draws on expert interviews and document analysis to investigate the political and structural consequences of hierarchical dynamics in policy monitoring.

Finally, the paper concludes with a reflection on the current state of Roma civil society advocacy and offers recommendations to strengthen monitoring, accountability,

[1] Fundamental Rights Report 2022, 08.06.2022, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Available at: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2022-fundamental-rights-report-2022_en.pdf, Downloaded (03.04.2024)

[2] Fundamental Rights Report 2022, 08.06.2022, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Available at: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2022-fundamental-rights-report-2022_en.pdf, Downloaded (03.04.2024)

and participation in both national and EU-level Roma inclusion strategies.

2 Literature review and conceptual framework

2.1. Hierarchical power relations

Hierarchy as a concept

The world order is based on power relations rooted in hierarchical dimensions. Hierarchy manifests in formal structures like employment roles, the caste system, and social classes, reflecting how power is distributed within everyday society. It is often associated with a chain of command and control and is pervasive in the modern world. Max Weber was one of the first to conceptualize the power and constraints of bureaucracy, noting how it could be impersonal and crushing to the human spirit and agency (Constas, 1958).

Regarding formal hierarchy, Börzel (2010) differentiates three types of institutionalized rule structures: market system competitions, negotiation systems, and hierarchy. These structures differ in the degree of coupling between the various entities. Across these forms, political agendas are determined through a mix of hierarchical and/or non-hierarchical coordination. In these dynamics, institutions enforce compliance – both physically and legally – while societies are organized by multiple, interacting hierarchies that evolve over time. In this paper, hierarchy is conceptualized not only as the distribution of power between different entities but also as the outcomes of such power, both bottom-up and top-down, forming a model of value that influences policy, including Roma integration.

Top-Down Hierarchies

Top-down interventions and hierarchies are the most prevalent approaches in development initiatives worldwide. Governments, international organizations, and donors often set the agenda for CSOs and global interventions. According to Kaiser (2020), top-down approaches have hindered development. Over the past fifty years, the money allocated for poverty reduction and growth has not yielded significant development outcomes. Initiatives led by powerful donor agencies have often involved experts at the top. While bottom-up approaches are crucial, they still depend on top-down financial backing (Ibid, pp. 92-93). Recent trends have begun to favor locally led initiatives – especially those endorsed by the EC – that seek to balance these approaches.

Top-down hierarchies in Hungary appear in social systems that target specific citizens while excluding others. The Hungarian government allocates tax benefits to working parents with children, which in turn excludes unemployed parents and those living below the poverty line (especially the Roma) from receiving social benefits (Bozóki, 2015). In Hungary, homelessness is currently criminalized. Moreover, the government's targeted initiatives primarily benefit government-friendly institutions and NGOs, while excluding NGOs that criticize it.

According to Börzel (2010), the EC's top-down hierarchy is evident in its power during infringement proceedings against Member States. On the other hand, decisions within the European Union are often based on voluntary coordination between Member States using soft tools. Additionally, European legislation is grounded in directives and regulations that outline objectives without specifying methods of implementation.

Hierarchy between Civil Society Organizations, the Government, and the EU

The European Union legislative process relies on both tangible and intangible hierarchies. Some decisions are legally binding and directly applicable. European governance has fostered political competition and innovative approaches, such as the OMC and mutual recognition between Member States (Börzel, 2010). Moreover, the Court of Justice has the authority to bind Member States by interpreting European law, solidifying the institutional framework based on a supranational hierarchy that dominates the policy process.

In Hungary, the EC has initiated various infringement proceedings and begun using funding conditionalities. Gulácsi and Kerényi (2023) described this through a study of the deficit procedure implemented by the EU, where Orbán's government reworked its economic policy to rebalance the state budget by reducing subsidies, imposing special corporate taxes, freezing certain prices, and redirecting pension funds. This happened in 2013, after the Economic and Financial Council lifted the excessive deficit procedure against Hungary. Other binding instruments used by the EU included the Horizontal Enabling Conditions, which were applied as preconditions for implementing the 2021-2027 shared management programs. Member States had to meet these conditions (including compliance with the EU Fundamental Rights Charter) to receive their share of the budget (Ibid, pp. 10-13).

According to Buyse (2018), CSOs increasingly became conceptualized as entities separate from and opposed to the state – a social space distinct from state institutions, the family, or the business world. This highlights the subordinate relationship between nation-states and their civil society. Recently, with the expansion of security-related policies and increasing discrimination, the shrinking of civic space has intensified in several states, affecting groups working on anti-discrimination issues (Negri & Pazderski, 2021). Hungary is the only country in the European Union with an obstructed civic space, as the government sanctions critical voices and restricts access to funding.[3] One of the key challenges is the 2017 Law on the 'Transparency of Foreign-Funded NGOs' (Negri & Pazderski, 2021). This has affected various NGOs, leading to surprise audits, office visits, and public debate.[4] Additionally, recent attacks on USAID-funded organizations further illustrate the government's restrictive approach.[5]

Another example is state-funded programs supporting Community Service Organizations, particularly the National Cooperation Fund (NCF), which distributed $18.3 million in 2019 (Móra et al. (2021). Upon investigation, the NCF was accused of being biased toward government-friendly organizations, with a non-user-friendly website and a lack of clear data on available grants.

Despite this, CSOs, thanks to the EC's consultation processes, can indirectly wield hierarchical power over their governments. When CSOs are obstructed by their governments, they tend to direct their lobbying efforts toward Brussels. These efforts are most apparent during conferences, events, and meetings organized by institutions such as the European Economic and Social Committee, the EC, and key donors. Other efforts include lobbying other national governments, embassies, and the public.

The hierarchical dynamics discussed here are central to understanding community-led development and monitoring in Hungarian and EU Roma policies. These power

[3] Country Profile: Hungary, Civicus, Available at: https://civicus.org/index.php/es/component/tags/tag/hungary (Accessed 02.09.2024)

[4] Note: This act was repealed following a CJEU decision.

[5] Country Profile: Hungary, Civicus, Available at: https://civicus.org/index.php/es/component/tags/tag/hungary (Accessed 02.09.2024)

structures – from national to supranational levels – shape how policies are crafted and implemented. In Hungary, restrictive national policies and top-down practices often limit effective Roma integration. As a response, civil society actors are turning to EU institutions as an alternative avenue for influence, a core focus of this paper. In summary, the literature on hierarchical power relations highlights the crucial role of both formal and informal structures in shaping policy outcomes. From domestic hierarchies that determine resource allocation to supranational hierarchies that enforce compliance through legal mechanisms, these dynamics directly impact the formulation and implementation of Roma integration policies in Hungary. Understanding these layers of authority is essential in any analysis of why community-led initiatives often find greater leverage at the EU level, providing a critical perspective on the challenges and opportunities for effective Roma policy monitoring and development.

Shrinking civic space

As briefly discussed in the previous section, the phenomenon of shrinking civic space is gaining prominence in today's political landscape. It is a key reason behind the EC's efforts to consult with local CSOs and the various funding programs (e.g., CERV, Horizon Europe) implemented by the European Union. European development efforts and policies are partially managed by CSOs to counter this shrinking space. Around 20 per cent of resources are managed by these organizations (Carbone, 2008). Another initiative to support CSOs is the Confederation of European NGOs for Relief and Development (CONCORD), established with backing from the EC. Similarly, to mobilize Roma NGOs, the European Roma Grassroots Organizations (ERGO) Network was created in Brussels to advocate alongside Roma and pro-Roma organizations across Europe.

According to the Central Statistical Office, around 61,000 NGOs were operating in Hungary in 2019, including 34,000 associations, 19,000 foundations, and 8,000 other types of organizations. Over the past five years, this number has decreased by 1,200 entities (Móra et al., 2021). The Hungarian government has actively obstructed civil society. In a speech, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán stated: '*We must deal with paid political activists here. And these political activists are, moreover, political activists paid by foreigners* [...] *It is vital, therefore, that if we would like to reorganize our nation-state instead of the liberal state, we should make it clear that these are not civilians coming against us, opposing us, but political activists attempting to promote foreign interests. All of us should know who the characters behind the masks are*' (Nazarski, 2017, p. 275). This statement reflects the current political climate in Hungary. Amnesty International reported in 2017 that the Hungarian government sought to discredit, intimidate, and stigmatize critical NGOs. Under a new law, if an NGO receives over €23,000 a year in foreign funds, it must register itself as a foreign organization.

This deliberate shrinking of civic space underscores the importance of supranational mechanisms and external funding channels in preserving civil society's voice. Hierarchy is thus not only a matter of formal authority but also a tool of exclusion or inclusion. Where national structures suppress dissent, the EU and its institutional hierarchies become sites of potential resistance and empowerment for CSOs. In this context, understanding hierarchical dynamics is essential for grasping the evolving power structures surrounding Roma inclusion and broader human rights advocacy in Hungary and across Europe.

2.1 Multilevel Governance and Europeanization

This section explores how ideas about multilevel governance and Europeanization help us understand the way the EU, national governments, and other actors work together. Multilevel governance (MLG) is a way to describe how the EU really works. Unlike a normal state or a simple international organization, the EU is built on networks. Local, regional, national, and supranational bodies all interact closely, sharing responsibilities and ideas (Bache et al., 2016). In today's system, the state no longer stands alone as the sole gatekeeper between domestic and international matters. Instead, regional governments work directly with the EC, helping to implement policies and even influencing decisions through both informal discussions and formal bodies (Tortola, 2017). An important part of this process is the involvement of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other societal actors. These groups join the conversation and help shape policies, which reflects a broader trend where the traditional lines between government, business, and civil society are becoming blurred. As Hooghe and Marks (2003) put it, authority is now shared in multiple directions – upwards, downwards, and sideways – making for a richer, though sometimes more complicated, picture of governance. While this approach offers flexibility and allows for more voices to be heard, it also comes with challenges, like coordinating efforts across different layers of government and managing unexpected effects when policies cross borders.

Europeanization is the process by which EU ideas, rules, and laws make their way into national legal systems. This can happen actively – through deliberate reforms – or passively, as countries gradually adjust to EU norms. It works through several mechanisms: countries must comply with EU law, change their own structures and opportunities, and sometimes even shift the way people think about policy (Knill & Lehmkuhl, 2002). Research shows that from Hungary's EU accession in 2004 until the 2018 elections, about 38 per cent of Hungarian laws were influenced by European regulations – a higher rate than in some other countries (Bíró-Nagy & Laki, 2022). Yet, national laws still dominate, and Hungary has struggled to fully implement EU recommendations. Despite receiving a high number of recommendations, Hungary scored low in putting them into practice. Even though the EU has shaped Hungary's legal framework, there are still significant gaps, especially when it comes to ensuring the rule of law.

Harmonization is related to Europeanization but focuses specifically on aligning national laws through EU directives. This two-step process – where the EU sets rules and then each Member State adopts them – does not always lead to uniform social policies across borders. For instance, while EU directives on non-discrimination protect vulnerable workers within each country, they do not necessarily standardize working conditions across the entire EU. This shows that true cross-border integration in social policies remains a challenge (Threlfall, 2003).Overall, the literature on multilevel governance and Europeanization paints a picture of a complex and evolving system. Although Hungary has shown a high degree of legislative Europeanization, the gap between EU expectations and domestic practices remains significant, especially in areas like rule-of-law enforcement and Roma integration. These insights are crucial as they help us understand why Hungary's policies sometimes stray from core EU values, and they set the stage for our deeper analysis of Hungary's National Strategy for Roma Integration. By considering both hierarchical and network-based processes,

the challenges and opportunities in aligning national policies with European ideals become clearer.

2.2 Applying Nancy Fraser's Justice Framework to Roma Policy Monitoring

The monitoring and evaluation of Roma policies in Hungary unfold within a complex governance structure marked by contested issues of justice, recognition, and representation. Interactions between civil society, the Hungarian government, and the EC reflect broader debates about power hierarchies and justice. Nancy Fraser's three-dimensional theory – encompassing redistribution (economic), recognition (cultural), and representation (political) – offers a critical lens to understand the structural challenges faced by Roma CSOs (Fraser, 2007).

Fraser (2007) argues that full participation requires addressing both economic and cultural injustices, often rooted in institutional hierarchies. The political dimension is central, as it defines who is included or excluded from fair distribution and recognition. Cultural injustice, manifesting as domination, disrespect, or invisibility, undermines equitable redistribution (Fraser, 2020). While recognition affirms group identities, redistribution may seek to dismantle group-based disadvantages, highlighting the potential tension between the two. To reconcile this, Fraser (2020) proposes two strategies: affirmative remedies that address outcomes without altering the root structures, and transformative remedies that aim to change those structures. Her model helps assess the (mis)representation of Roma in policy arenas and critiques the EU's liberal identity politics, which often prioritize recognition without ensuring structural change.

By applying Fraser's framework, this study analyses how Roma policy monitoring navigates the tensions between redistribution, recognition, and representation. It critiques the EU's limited mechanisms, which emphasize recognition but fall short on ensuring political inclusion and accountability. Without stronger representation, EU efforts remain insufficient for achieving substantive justice for Roma communities.

3 Hungarian and EU Roma integration politics

3.1 Hungarian National Strategy for Roma Integration (NSRI)

The integration of Roma communities has been a longstanding challenge in Europe, necessitating policy interventions at both national and transnational levels. The EU has consistently emphasized the importance of fostering Roma inclusion, given the persistent socio-economic marginalization faced by these communities. In response, various policy instruments have been developed to address Roma exclusion and discrimination.

A notable example is the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015,[6] an international effort adopted by twelve European states and supported by key organizations such as the EC, the Open Society Institute, the World Bank, the Council of Europe, UN bodies, and European Roma NGOs. This initiative provided a framework for governments to combat Roma exclusion while monitoring progress.[7] Following the conclusion of the

[6] During the initial decade, monitoring was conducted by the Decade Watch and Civil Society Reports; these were a series of assessments conducted by coalitions of actors in civil society in the countries participating in the Decade to evaluate the implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategies and Decade Action Plans.

[7] Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015, Roma Integration 2020, Regional Cooperation Council, Available at: https://www.rcc.int/romaintegration2020/romadecade_p/17/decade-of-roma-inclusion-2005-2015, Accessed

Decade, a consortium of states and international organizations recognized the need for continued work toward Roma integration. This resulted in the establishment of the Roma Decade of 2020, which sought to build on the feedback and lessons learned from the 2005-2015 period.[8] In parallel, in 2011, the EC called upon European states with Roma minorities to develop NSRI, outlining goals to be pursued over a ten-year period.

The EC emphasized that involving Roma communities was crucial to the strategy's success. Additionally, raising awareness among non-Roma populations and combating discrimination were central themes. The strategy addressed four key areas: education, employment, healthcare, and housing, with evaluations conducted every two years to assess progress. As a country with one of the largest Roma populations in Europe, Hungary has been a central player in the EU's Roma integration framework. The Hungarian government submitted its first NSRI in response to the EC's 2011 call, setting objectives aligned with EU priorities. The strategy aimed to enhance Roma access to education, employment, healthcare, and housing while fostering social cohesion and combating prejudice.

For the second National Strategy for Roma Integration (2021-2030), the EC recommended a series of changes and new instruments. The updated strategy expanded its focus to include seven key areas: equality, inclusion, participation, education, employment, health, and housing. For each of these areas, the EC set forth specific targets, goals, and tools to help states achieve meaningful outcomes. In Hungary's case, implementation has been accompanied by evaluations conducted by the EC, the European Fundamental Rights Agency, and CSOs. The EC required Member States to submit their revised strategies by September 2021, with reporting every two years. Additionally, an in-depth midterm evaluation will be conducted by the EC, and monitoring will be carried out by the European Fundamental Rights Agency and CSOs. Hungary submitted its updated 2021-2030 NSRI to the EC in August 2021.

3.2 Strategy critics

In 2016, the European Roma Rights Center expressed significant concerns about the effectiveness of the EU Roma Framework, declaring that it had 'hit a wall.' According to the center, half a decade after the framework's introduction, there had been no tangible improvements in the lives of Roma communities across Europe. The gap between the framework's plans and its actual implementation was perceived as wider than ever (Ryder et al., 2020). Furthermore, within the EU Roma Framework, the Roma were often portrayed not as citizens with violated rights, but as potential labor market participants with limited education. This view reduced Roma inclusion to a matter of labor market integration, while the policies themselves functioned as parallel mechanisms to those inadequately provided by the state (Schafft & Ferkovics, 2018).

Català-Oltra et al. (2021) argued that the strategy for Roma integration highlighted the limitations of a united policy within the European Union. In their evaluation of NSRIs, Bartlett et al. (2016) identified several key gaps and flaws. These included the failure to adopt an integrated and holistic methodology to address the intersectional and multi-sectoral challenges faced by Roma communities, the unclear distribution of

(04.04.2024).

[8] Decade of Roma Inclusion 2020, Roma Integration 2020, Regional Cooperation Council, Available at: https://www.rcc.int/romaintegration2020/romadecade_p/18/roma-decade-and-roma-integration-2020, Accessed (03.04.2024)

roles and responsibilities between various levels of government, and inadequate administrative capacity to address these issues. Furthermore, they pointed to the cumbersome bureaucratic processes for accessing EU funds, weak monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, and a general lack of political will at national, sub-national, and EU levels.

Goodwin and Buijs (2013) also criticized the framework for its overemphasis on labor market participation, viewing this as the central mechanism for Roma inclusion. This focus on economic integration, they argued, framed social integration as merely a prerequisite for employment, without addressing the cultural aspects of integration. Consequently, the framework implicitly demanded that Roma conform to the majority way of life, equating integration with assimilation through the labor market, and neglecting the need to preserve and respect Roma cultural identity. This critique points to a broader issue in the EU's approach to Roma inclusion: while the frameworks and strategies are well-intentioned, their narrow focus on economic outcomes, coupled with systemic administrative and political shortcomings, has limited their effectiveness in addressing the deeper, multi-faceted challenges faced by Roma communities.

Lastly, while the EU Framework provided a new incentive for Roma integration, its top-down implementation has been met with significant criticism, particularly from Roma scholars who analyze its real-world effects. Building on the concerns of a 'soft' OMC, Rostas & Kovacs (2021) argue that the Hungarian government's implementation of the National Strategy for NSRI has been superficial. They contend that despite adopting the EU's language, the government's actions often fail to translate into meaningful change and instead reinforce existing power structures. Rostas and Kovacs (2021) highlight that the lack of genuine political will and the exclusion of authentic Roma participation in the decision-making process render the framework ineffective in tackling the deep-rooted causes of marginalization in Hungary. This perspective reinforces the argument that without bottom-up accountability and Roma-led oversight, supranational strategies risk becoming mere bureaucratic exercises.

3.3 Roma Civil Monitor

The Roma Civil Monitor (RCM) was initiated in March 2017 as a pilot project entitled Capacity Building for Roma Civil Society and Strengthening Its Involvement in the Monitoring of National Roma Integration Strategies, with a consortium of four NGOs and funded by the EC Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers (DG JUST), Directorate for Equality and Union Citizenship. According to Central European University, the project aims to strengthen civil society's monitoring of NSRI implementation. It seeks to enhance civil society monitoring by improving the policy-monitoring abilities of NGO actors and by preparing annual reports.

The pilot project was implemented with the participation of 90 NGOs from twenty-seven Member States. The main activities of the pilot project consisted of capacity building for the NGOs, the development of country-specific monitoring reports, data collection and analysis, the dissemination of findings, and networking between members. Following the adoption of the EU NSRI in October 2020, and with support from the EU Parliament and the EC, it was decided to continue the RCM from 2021 to 2025 with the same consortium and the support of Central European University (CEU).

4 Methodology

The study described here employed a dual-methodological approach to examine the hierarchical dynamics shaping Roma policy monitoring in Hungary. First, a meta-content analysis of both the Roma Civil Monitor and European Commission policy reports was conducted. This analysis enabled the identification of key evaluation instruments, indicators, and benchmarks used in monitoring Roma policies, offering insights into the structural mechanisms shaping policy assessments.

Second, to understand the positionality and background of these evaluations, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a member of the Hungarian RCM, complemented by a qualitative questionnaire sent to EC officials.[9] These methods were designed to explore the timeline, expert involvement, policy evaluation processes, and the choice of indicators and benchmarks used in Roma policy assessments. The study also examined how institutional and political constraints at the national level influenced these evaluations.

The sampling strategy followed a judgmental (purposive) sampling method, selecting key experts directly involved in the drafting and evaluation of Roma policies. This methodological design allows for a critical examination of the governance structures and power dynamics influencing Roma inclusion policies in Hungary. It highlights the interplay between civil society, national authorities, and EU institutions, revealing the extent to which Roma CSOs can leverage EU-driven monitoring mechanisms to influence national policy.

A limitation of this study must be acknowledged: the absence of confirmed Roma participants in the interview sample. While every effort was made to solicit a broad range of expert perspectives, constraints related to institutional access and positionality inadvertently limited direct input from Roma community members. This underscores the need for future research designs that prioritize Roma-led and Roma-authored approaches to policy analysis.

5 Discussion

5.1 Methodologies and content analysis of NSRI Reports

The NSRI has been analyzed and criticized both by the EC and the CSOs in the form of the RCM. The EC report is notably concise, presenting its evaluation in a tabular format that verifies whether specific indicators and measures are present in the NSRI (a process that was conducted uniformly across all EU Member States with Roma minorities). In contrast, the RCM report offers a more comprehensive analysis, drawing on diverse indicators and benchmarks. Both documents rely on data provided by the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) and the RCM, yet they differ in depth and scope.

The RCM follows a different outline, as well as different measures and criteria. Moreover, this report was referenced and included in the EC report. The Hungarian RCM report is a joint effort of a consortium of NGOs and experts from civil society. It included the policy analysis process conducted by different stakeholders and was drafted by an external consultant. The core RCM is managed by the Central European University, which directs the Hungarian RCM coalition.

[9] Table 1 in the appendix

5.2 Advantages of the policy reports

While the EC admits to a more hierarchical relationship with the Hungarian government, the Hungarian RCM adopts a more horizontal relationship, allowing it to openly criticize government policies and practices.

The advantage of the EC is that it is a vast institution comprising several interlocked directorates and significant financial resources. These advantages facilitate a tremendous network of connected experts, institutions, and directorates, enabling the analysis of previous NSRI strategies throughout the EU, the articulation of the Council Recommendations, and the EU Roma Strategic Framework. These latter two documents serve as the policy models and pillars for further policy analysis of any future strategy, regardless of the originating country, and are accepted by governments. Moreover, due to its reach and capacity, the EC can outsource some analyses and procedures to external expert organizations with extensive experience in the field. This, in turn, has diversified the working methods of the Commission but has also diminished transparency regarding policy analysis and the articulation of the two benchmark documents. The expertise of the EC has allowed for a formal set of tested policy analysis measures to be employed in different public and social policy areas, enhancing the credibility and power of the mechanism. Lastly, the report incorporates the findings of the FRA and the RCM, which provide a better understanding of the current metrics and indicators concerning Roma inclusion.

The main advantage of the Hungarian RCM report is its deeper understanding of the Hungarian socio-political context and its incorporation of multiple perspectives from different civil society actors. The report provides a description of the current context of the Hungarian government from both political and sociological perspectives. Moreover, the RCM mechanism itself adopts an academic approach to public policy analysis and sociology, enabling well-researched and personalized guidelines and methodologies. The report was created by Phiren Amenca, which emphasizes Roma representation in the decision-making process. The consortium consisted of eight CSOs with deep expertise in the field. The positionality of the Hungarian RCM allowed for a more critical and thorough analysis of the strategy and included several testimonies from CSOs.

Both reports relied heavily on the Council Recommendations and the EU Roma Strategic Framework as policy models, comparing and analyzing the strategy according to these documents.

5.3 Limitations of the policy reports

Policy analysis can be conducted through top-down and/or bottom-up approaches. The positionality and discourse of the experts behind the reports should also be taken into consideration. According to Vogel (2016), 'cultural insensitivity, a disregard of traditions, norms, customs, and a general blindness to the local context are responsible for the failure of international attempts to foster peace.'

The disadvantage of the EC report is that it did not involve a more personalized approach to the Hungarian context. As a result, the report lacked the nuanced, context-specific recommendations seen in the RCM report. The mechanism has established certain processes, measures, and methodologies that were applied uniformly across all European countries, resulting in a structured report that did not reflect the Hungarian context. As such, the EC report, unlike the RCM report, was not personalized

in its use of the policy model and in its recommendations. In light of recent events, the EC has articulated recommendations to improve the strategy to some extent; however, it does not seem to have leveraged this to push for deeper action and more enhanced policies from the Hungarian government. Analyses of specific policy principles within the EU Framework support this critique of the EC's generalized approach. For example, the principle of Mainstreaming, Social Inclusion, and Gender Equality (MSG) is central to the strategy, yet its application in Hungary has been questioned by Roma policy experts. Mainstreaming has often resulted in the government avoiding targeted, effective interventions for Roma communities. Instead of embedding Roma inclusion across all policy sectors, the government uses the concept of 'mainstreaming' to justify a lack of specific, funded programs, ultimately making accountability more difficult. This failure illustrates a broader pattern in which the EU framework's tools, without rigorous and context-sensitive enforcement, can be used to legitimize inaction at the national level. Last, regarding wording, the EC report did not provide concrete definitions for important terms or clarify its understanding of empowerment and inclusion.

The limitation of the Hungarian RCM is that it was not institutionalized enough. Consortium coordination was nearly nonexistent, which limited the active participation and contributions of the members. The report was produced as a last-minute effort, leaving little room for in-depth consultation or capacity building among consortium members. The Hungarian RCM was not adequately monitored by the CEU RCM, causing delays in activities and resulting in a last-minute report. This did not allow consortium members to provide thorough feedback. Moreover, the project activities and the policy analysis guidelines and methods were not communicated to consortium members, as the lead single-handedly opted to contract an external expert to create and draft the report. The Hungarian RCM report and project did not facilitate concrete capacity building for consortium members in policy analysis and did not clarify the division of tasks among them. This apparent lack of transparency between the lead and consortium members diminished the potential of such a coalition. Furthermore, in terms of policy analysis by NGOs, it appears that there was no formal policy analysis process in place, and the policy process employed during the previous RCM report was not utilized. Finally, interviews were conducted with three government officers, and their input was included in the report. However, there was no mention of the possibility of bias or dishonest answers; public officers tend to communicate politically or manipulate facts.

Nancy Fraser's (2000) concept of justice as both redistribution and recognition is particularly relevant here. Monitoring policies is not just about tracking outcomes or assessing efficiency – it is also about examining whether the voices of marginalized groups are genuinely recognized and whether they have real opportunities to shape policy decisions. When public consultations are last-minute or symbolic, and when civil society's input is dismissed or diluted, the entire monitoring process risks becoming a performative exercise. Thus, while the EU's Roma integration framework presents itself as participatory, in practice it often fails to deliver on its democratic promise. Formal inclusion does not always translate into meaningful influence. If monitoring tools like the RCM are to support genuine progress, they must go beyond procedural participation and address the underlying power asymmetries that prevent Roma communities and their advocates from being full partners in shaping their futures.

5.4 The role of civil society in policy

The Hungarian government was the first state to submit its strategy to the EC. The EC's potential is significant when it comes to advocating for policies. The feedback provided by the report prompted the Hungarian government to consult with civil society. As a member of Autonomia stated, 'Due to the report, it might happen that the Hungarian government will not receive money from the EU for Roma integration. Moreover, half a year after the report, the government organized a consultation meeting with critical government NGOs, which shows the pressure that the report has put on them. There is very slow development.'[10]

Additionally: 'The Hungarian governmental officers knew about the RCM report and were aware of the two-year-old analysis (articulated by civil society about the draft strategy during the consultation). As such, they knew about the criticisms and the opinions. They did not understand the weight of it, and it grew like a wave, evolving into significant criticism from the EC side, which amplified our voice.' [11] The Hungarian RCM report is an important policy analysis document that was included at the EU level in the EC report. This feedback loop underscores how civil society efforts, despite being limited, can eventually influence policy at the EU level.

It is not that the Hungarian government did not consult CSOs about the strategy; rather, it did so in an unorthodox manner. The draft strategy was sent to 11 CSOs during the Christmas period with a 10-day deadline. The CSOs quickly mobilized to provide urgent feedback to the government. Later, the government published the same draft strategy without any modifications, which shows that while there technically was a consultation, it was not meaningful. Similar instances were highlighted by Móra et al. (2021), such as when the government asked the trade union to submit comments on a bill over the Easter holidays (April 9 to April 14), or the research institute network of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences receiving a draft with only hours to provide an opinion on it. Such practices illustrate a tokenistic approach to public participation that fails to provide genuine opportunities for input.

5.5 Influence of hierarchical structures

Until August 2023, around twenty-two thousand infringement processes had been launched, of which 716 were against Hungary (Gulácsi & Kerényi, 2023). In 2022, after various attempts and reports on the decline of democracy in Hungary, the European Union activated the rule of law conditionality regulation to protect the Union's budget. Using the horizontal enabling conditions, the EC suspended Hungary's access to European Union funds, and the European Court of Justice dismissed Hungary's annulment action, which is not subject to appeal (Rutherford, 2023). This opened the way for the European Union to act aggressively against Hungary, along with Poland, the two largest net recipients of EU funds.

Following this, the government initiated remedial procedures to restore the rule of law, which the Commission did not judge to be in compliance with the requirements. In November 2022, it suggested suspending funding for 65 per cent of three programs associated with the 2021-2027 budget cycle (Gulácsi & Kerényi, 2023). These enforcement actions underscore how supranational hierarchical mechanisms can directly influence national policy implementation.

[10] Interview with the director of Autonomia Foundation (20.03.2023).
[11] Interview with the director of Autonomia Foundation (20.03.2023).

On the other hand, the hierarchical relationship between the Hungarian government and NGOs remains as unstable as ever. In addition to the laws and the previously discussed shrinking of civil society, there is no national-level support, while the government is disabling access to even international funds. The latest scandal concerns the Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway funds, where Hungary did not reach an agreement. €214.6 million in funding from the EEA and Norway Grants was supposed to be allocated to Hungary. The signed Memoranda of Understanding included a section asserting that no programs could be accepted until an autonomous fund operator for civil society funding had been selected. However, the donors and the Hungarian government did not reach an agreement on a Fund Operator by the deadline, resulting in Hungary losing access to the funds, along with independent CSOs. This incident reflects ongoing tensions and underscores how hierarchical power dynamics at the national level can jeopardize the financial support available to independent CSOs.[12]

The EC established forums, committees, boards, and intergovernmental and transnational networks to engage in informal practices and agreements. One of these forums is notably the Roma Week, organized annually around April. This space allows for informal and formal exchanges between civil society and decision-makers. These examples have served as a self-legitimation strategy for the EC, as it aims to appear as a competent representative of European concerns that considers societal interests from the bottom up (Steffek, 2014). The *White Paper on European Governance* (2001) and the *General Principles and Minimum Standards for the Consultation of Interested Parties* (2002) attest to these efforts.

This discussion section ties directly into the paper's broader examination of how hierarchical dynamics and multilevel governance structures influence Roma integration policies. By critically analyzing both the strengths and limitations of policy reports (NSRI, EC, and RCM) and evaluating the role of civil society in policy monitoring, the complex interplay between local and supranational forces in this specific context became clearer. These insights are pivotal for understanding why Roma CSOs increasingly turn to EU institutions for advocacy and how these power dynamics affect policy implementation in Hungary.

6 Conclusion

This paper has explored the intricate dynamics between Roma civil society, Hungarian government policy, and EU mechanisms, particularly through the lens of the Hungarian NSRI. The analysis of the EC's and RCM reports highlights significant gaps in both the policies and their implementation. Our findings reveal that while the EU has demonstrated a commitment to Roma inclusion via frameworks such as the OMC, this commitment is undermined by its soft governance nature, which leaves critical decisions to national political will.

The findings emphasize the limitations of the OMC as a 'soft' governance tool. While it encourages Member States to adopt inclusive strategies, the lack of binding mechanisms and deference to national political will undermine its effectiveness. As argued by Matache (2017), Hungary's policies towards Roma integration often reinforce existing power imbalances and fail to tackle the root causes of antigypsyism. These limitations are compounded by the Hungarian government's reluctance to adopt targeted measures or address the societal structures that perpetuate Roma exclusion.

[12] This incident deeply affected the funding of independent Roma and Pro-Roma civil society organizations.

Both the EC and RCM have played crucial roles in monitoring the NSRI, yet their differing approaches reveal a tension between maintaining diplomatic relations with the Hungarian government and confronting deeper systemic issues. The RCM's more critical stance provided a clearer reflection of the Hungarian context, offering an honest critique of the government's failure to implement meaningful Roma inclusion measures. However, internal challenges within the RCM report drafting process, such as limited transparency and rushed timelines, have constrained its impact.

Moreover, our discussion of hierarchical power relations, multilevel governance, and Europeanization has shown that the effectiveness of policy monitoring is deeply intertwined with the broader socio-political landscape. Moving forward, achieving genuine Roma inclusion in Hungary and across the EU will require more than mere monitoring and soft recommendations. There is a pressing need for both EU and national policymakers to revisit and strengthen accountability measures – potentially through enforceable tools like the Race Equality Directive – while also adopting a more comprehensive, culturally sensitive approach that includes non-Roma populations in the dialogue.

Fraser's three-dimensional theory of justice – redistribution, recognition, and representation – offers a critical lens to interpret these findings. EU policies often emphasize cultural recognition without adequately addressing economic redistribution or political representation. This imbalance weakens transformative potential and perpetuates structural injustice. As Fraser (2020) notes, without addressing the institutional roots of inequality, affirmative measures risk becoming symbolic rather than structural. Roma CSOs continue to face representational misrecognition in policy arenas, and their potential to influence remains underutilized within this multilevel governance system.

Moving forward requires more than monitoring and soft recommendations. The EU must strengthen its commitment to Roma inclusion by revisiting its reliance on the OMC and considering more enforceable measures, such as the Race Equality Directive. Additionally, both EU and national policies must adopt a more comprehensive approach that includes non-Roma populations and focuses on dismantling the institutional frameworks behind antigypsyism. This will necessitate deeper involvement from Roma communities and civil society in the policymaking process, as well as a cultural shift in how Roma identity, arts, and history are integrated into these strategies.

Ultimately, achieving Roma inclusion in Hungary and across the EU requires a combination of top-down and bottom-up initiatives informed by both policy evaluation and community participation. Policymakers must embrace a more redistributive and egalitarian discourse that addresses not only the immediate material needs of the Roma but also challenges the broader structures perpetuating their marginalization. Civil society organizations can influence Hungarian public policy through a top-down approach. Through navigating hierarchical relationships, local monitoring, and advocacy in Brussels, community-led development remains possible even within the constraints of Hungary's shrinking civic space.

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