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POLICY ANALYSIS REPORT

BRIDGING EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

A Comprehensive Policy Analysis of
Vocational Education and Training Pathways for
Roma Youth in the Western Balkans And
Türkiye

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BUCHAREST





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List of Abbreviations

BiH - Bosnia and Herzegovina

CEDEFOP - European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training

DG NEAR - Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations

ERRC - European Roma Rights Centre

ETF - European Training Foundation

EU - European Union

FRA - European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights

GDP - Gross Domestic Product

ILO - International Labour Organization

IPA - Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance

ISCED - International Standard Classification of Education

NEET - Not in Education, Employment, or Training

NGO - Non-Governmental Organization

OECD - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

REF - Roma Education Fund

RRS - Regional Roma Survey

UNDP - United Nations Development Programme

UNESCO - United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

VET - Vocational Education and Training

RAE - Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptians

RE - Roma and Egyptians

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background and purpose

Despite twenty years of political interventions and considerable financial investments dedicated to the inclusion of the Roma across Europe, it becomes apparent that Roma youth continue to experience disproportionate rates of educational exclusion and marginalization within the labor market. This policy analysis evaluates the developmental routes of vocational and technical education for Roma youth across seven countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Türkiye. The research provides evidence-based insights to support policy reform and advocacy efforts aimed at sustaining and developing the educational and employment practices of Roma youth residing in the Western Balkans and Türkiye.

Key Findings

1. Severe and persistent educational gaps

The analysis reveals marked disparities regarding the scholastic achievements of Roma youth compared to their non-Roma counterparts, more precisely:

- 1.1. Only 27% of Roma youth aged between 20 and 24 years have graduated from upper secondary education, as opposed to 80% of the general population (FRA, 2022).
- 1.2. 63% of the Roma youth population aged between 15 and 24 years are integrated into the NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) category, compared to the 12% to be

found within the general youth population (European Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2016).

1.3. Analyzing the reviewed works, one can observe the presence of school abandonment tendencies that are four to five times higher among Roma children relative to the national averages of all seven states.

The World Bank's Regional Roma Survey (2017) documented these major discrepancies between the two populations, observing that since 2011, despite the efforts and attention accorded to the implementation of ameliorative policies, these differences between Roma and non-Roma youth have remained similar (Robayo-Abril & Millán, 2019).

2. A profound exclusion from the labor market can be observed

2.1. 43% of the surveyed Roma across the entire region perform formal, paid work, while many of the employment opportunities available to the Roma are considered precarious, or involve the performance of informal labor (FRA, 2022).

2.2. 80% of the Roma population live at risk of poverty, when compared to the European average of 17 percent (FRA, 2022).

2.3. Even in circumstances where Roma youth successfully complete a form of vocational or technological education, they encounter a series of discriminatory barriers in accessing the employment positions for which they are qualified, and are remunerated with smaller monetary amounts compared to their non-Roma peers possessing a similar or equivalent qualification.

The country-specific data analyzed by the World Bank (2019) demonstrate the fact that the Roma are dramatically underrepresented within the labor market, that the disparities between the Roma and non-Roma populations are exceedingly wide, and that the progress recorded between the years 2011 and 2017 is minimal, or even non-existent, with regard to labor market integration.

3. Underrepresentation and the monitoring of the VET educational system

Roma youth are subjected to a vocational and technological education of a significantly lower quality, a phenomenon observed through:

- 3.1. Their channeling toward VET educational routes considered to be unattractive from both an educational and a professional standpoint, more precisely into school profiles that entail trades irrelevant to the contemporary labor market.
- 3.2. Discriminatory practices of an educational nature, which commence as early as primary education, systematically direct Roma students away from academic pathways and from vocational training programs of a higher quality.
- 3.3. The participation of Roma children in early childhood education (prior to the commencement of primary school) remains significantly lower than that of those within the general population, with enrollment rates situated around the value of 50% or less in numerous European countries, a fact which creates an educational disadvantage from the very first years of life (UNICEF, 2024; World Bank et al., 2011).

Comparative studies concerning educational inclusion demonstrate that Roma students are systematically disadvantaged across multiple stages of European educational systems, including in their access to quality secondary education and vocational training. The published data indicate that the Roma encounter significant barriers regarding the transition to higher education or advantageous educational programs, while segregation in under-resourced schools and educational pathways yielding poorer outcomes contributes to the perpetuation of socio-economic disadvantages (OECD, 2020; ERGO Network, 2024).

4. The implementation gap hypothesis

The analysis likewise confirms the presence of major gaps between policy strategies and their subsequent implementation:

- 4.1. All seven countries possess, in one form or another, strategies for the integration of individuals of Roma ethnicity (2020-2030) containing an explicit VET component, as

well as objectives oriented toward this end (European Commission, 2020) nevertheless, the mechanisms for implementation remain weak.

4.2. Insufficient allocation of funds: The analyses available from international reports indicate that the specific funding intended for vocational training interventions for the Roma is insufficiently documented and unclear within national budgetary plans, a fact which reflects a deficit in the prioritization of sustainable inclusion in education and VET (World Bank, 2019; ETF, 2022).

4.3. Coordination among the ministries of education, ministries of labor, employment services, and civil society organizations is weak and unsustainable.

4.4. Solid monitoring mechanisms, including the collection of ethnically disaggregated data, are non-existent.

National reports consistently identify implementation capacity deficits as the primary obstacle to the transformation of political commitments into concrete results across all the targeted countries (European Training Foundation, 2024).

5. Multi-Dimensional Barriers

Roma youth are confronted with interconnected barriers that operate at multiple levels:

5.1. Macro-level barriers:

5.1.1. Widespread anti-gypsyism and discriminatory attitudes within society.

5.1.2. Weak economic opportunities in regions with a high concentration of Roma.

5.1.3. Geographical segregation and limited infrastructure in Roma communities.

5.2. Meso-level barriers:

5.2.1. School segregation: many Roma students attend predominantly Roma or de facto segregated schools, which are under-resourced.

5.2.2. Insufficient vocational counseling: career guidance services rarely reach Roma communities and seldom offer culturally adapted support.

5.2.3. Employer prejudices and discriminatory hiring practices.

5.3. Micro-level barriers:

5.3.1. Familial poverty: approximately 80% of the Roma population live at risk of poverty, which creates financial barriers to participation in VET (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2022).

5.3.2. Low educational aspirations, shaped by historical exclusion and the absence of successful role models.

5.3.3. Transportation costs and geographical distance from quality vocational training institutions.

Qualitative research highlights that policies targeting only a single level of intervention possess limited efficacy, thereby confirming the multi-dimensional barrier hypothesis (Robayo Abril & Millán, 2019).

6. Roma girls and young women are confronted with multiple and intersecting disadvantages:

6.1. The employment rates for Roma women are significantly lower than those of Roma men and of non-Roma women. The FRA (2019) data demonstrate that only approximately 20% of Roma women are employed, when compared to 35% for Roma men and 65% for non-Roma women (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2019).

6.2. Gender norms that favor early marriages significantly reduce the participation of girls in vocational training programs. In certain communities, over 30% of Roma girls marry before reaching the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2021).

6.3. VET programs that address gender-specific barriers through targeted support (scholarships for girls, flexible programs, safe transportation) have demonstrated

graduation rates that are 15 to 20 percentage points higher than those of standard programs.

The analysis of gender dimensions highlights the fact that Roma women experience discrimination based on the intersection of ethnicity and gender, a circumstance which necessitates adapted interventions (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2017).

7. Urban-rural disparities:

The geographical analysis reveals significant differences between urban and rural areas:

- 7.1. Roma youth from rural areas have 30-40% less access to quality VET programs, due to geographical distances, transportation costs, and the limited availability of programs.
- 7.2. Quality VET institutions are concentrated in capital cities and major urban centers.
- 7.3. Rural Roma communities often do not possess information regarding the available VET opportunities or the enrollment procedures.

Successful models include mobile/flexible course delivery mechanisms, distance learning components, or residential support with financial subsidies for accommodation and transportation (Roma Education Fund, 2023).

8. Employer Discrimination

Labor market research confirms the existence of significant discriminatory barriers against the Roma:

- 8.1. Experimental studies and qualitative research demonstrate that Roma graduates of VET programs encounter discrimination across several stages: candidate selection (discrimination based on name or appearance), interviews, and hiring decisions (Polyacskó, 2008).
- 8.2. Roma workers report receiving lower salaries for the same work and are concentrated in precarious or informal employment, even following the completion of VET programs.

8.3. Effective integration into the labor market requires the stringent enforcement of anti-discrimination legislation, employer engagement strategies, and workplace inclusion programs.

Research documents that, even when young Roma possess equivalent qualifications, their employment rates are 20 to 30 percentage points lower than those of their non-Roma peers, while wage gaps reach 25-35% (Robayo Abril & Millán, 2019).

9. Country Variations

The comparative analysis reveals important differences among the countries:

9.1. Stronger performers:

9.1.1. More developed civil society sectors, focused on Roma rights;

9.1.2. Explicit Roma inclusion targets within general Vocational Education and Training (VET) policies;

9.1.3. More solid EU integration trajectories, which provide external pressure and technical assistance.

9.2. Weaker performers:

9.2.1. Fragmented governance structures that complicate policy implementation;

9.2.2. Limited civil society capacity;

9.2.3. Reduced resource allocation for interventions specific to the Roma community.

Nevertheless, success remains uneven and context-dependent, even within the better-performing countries. Albania, despite having relatively high preschool enrollment rates for Roma children in comparison to the region, also exhibits a wide income gap between the Roma and non-Roma populations (Robayo-Abril & Millán, 2019).

10. Elements of Good Practice

The analysis of successful interventions reveals common elements:

10.1. Solid partnerships between VET institutions and employers, including:

10.1.1. Apprenticeships and internships with dedicated employers;

10.1.2. The involvement of employers in curriculum development;

10.1.3. Work-based learning components.

10.2. Comprehensive student support services:

10.2.1. Financial support (scholarships, stipends, transportation subsidies);

10.2.2. Academic support (tutoring, remedial education, study groups);

10.2.3. Psychosocial support (mentoring, counseling, peer support networks).

10.3. Explicit measures against discrimination:

10.3.1. The training of teaching staff and administrators regarding cultural awareness;

10.3.2. Clear complaint mechanisms;

10.3.3. Diversity and inclusion policies.

10.4. Family and community involvement:

10.4.1. Outreach activities targeting Roma parents and community leaders;

10.4.2. The involvement of successful Roma role models as mentors and ambassadors;

10.4.3. Community-level information campaigns.

10.5. Sustained funding:

10.5.1. Multiannual financial commitments, rather than short-term projects;

10.5.2. Diversified funding sources, combining governmental, EU, and donor resources.

10.6. Examples of documented good practices:

10.6.1. The REF WinForVET project: A comprehensive support model that combines financial aid, mentoring, and partnerships with employers (Roma Education Fund, 2020-2022).

10.6.2. The Swiss Cooperation's Dual VET Pilot Program (Albania): An adapted dual system that combines school-based learning with workplace apprenticeships (Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, 2023).

Policy Recommendations

On the basis of a comprehensive documentary analysis and the synthesis of research evidence, the present report provides strategic recommendations organized around eight priority areas:

Priority Area 1: Access to and Enrollment in VET

- 1.1. The elimination of financial barriers through comprehensive scholarship programs intended to cover tuition fees, materials, transportation, and student living costs.
- 1.2. The implementation of affirmative action measures, including reserved places in quality VET programs.
- 1.3. The establishment of transparent application procedures, with proactive dissemination of information addressed to Roma communities.
- 1.4. The development of preparatory/transitional programs for Roma youth with incomplete primary education.

Priority Area 2: VET Quality and Labor Market Relevance

- 2.1. The alignment of the VET curriculum with the real demands of the labor market through regular and systematic consultations with employers.
- 2.2. Investment in modern equipment, qualified teaching staff, and updated and culturally sensitive pedagogical approaches.
- 2.3. The expansion of work-based learning components, including through paid apprenticeships and internships.
- 2.4. The institution of graduate tracking systems for the purpose of monitoring employment outcomes.

Priority Area 3: Anti-Discrimination and Inclusion

- 3.1. The implementation of mandatory training in the field of ethnic and cultural diversity for VET teachers, administrators, and career counselors.
- 3.2. The establishment of clear anti-discrimination policies and complaint submission mechanisms in all VET institutions.
- 3.3. The periodic conduct of discrimination audits and the publication of their results.
- 3.4. The support of Roma student associations and peer support networks.

Priority Area 4: Career Guidance and Transition Support

- 4.1. The establishment of specialized career counseling services that reach into Roma communities.
- 4.2. The development of culturally adapted educational or labor market guidance materials that highlight successful Roma role models.
- 4.3. The provision of comprehensive job placement services, including CV preparation, interview skills training, and connections with potential employers.
- 4.4. The creation of mentorship programs intended to connect Roma VET students with professionals already employed in their desired field.

Priority Area 5: Employer Engagement

- 5.1. The implementation of incentive programs for employers who hire Roma VET graduates (wage subsidies, tax incentives, recognition awards), where possible.
- 5.2. The development of employer networks engaged in the promotion of diversity and inclusion.
- 5.3. The provision of on-the-job training in the field of ethnic and cultural inclusion, in order to combat unconscious biases and stereotypes that may arise in the workplace.

Priority Area 6: Gender Mainstreaming

- 6.1. The design of gender-sensitive VET programs that address the barriers and difficulties faced by Roma girls and young women.
- 6.2. The provision of flexible programs that take into account the family responsibilities of young Roma women.
- 6.3. The guaranteeing of safe transportation and of learning environments that are supportive for young Roma women.
- 6.4. The combating of gender stereotypes in occupational choices through awareness campaigns.
- 6.5. The development of strategies to increase the degree of involvement of families and communities in supporting the education and employment of Roma girls.

Priority Area 7: Governance and Coordination

- 7.1. The establishment of inter-ministerial coordination mechanisms for the entire educational and occupational process, with clear resolutions and adequate resources.

- 7.2. The consolidation of the institutional capacity of agencies implementing policies dedicated to the education and employment of the Roma through training and technical assistance.
- 7.3. The ensuring of the systematic participation of Roma civil society in the development, implementation, and monitoring of policies dedicated to education and the labor force.
- 7.4. The creation of accountability mechanisms that compare budgetary allocations with measurable results.

Priority Area 8: Data and Monitoring

- 8.1. The implementation of the systematic collection of ethnically disaggregated educational and employment data.
 - 8.2. The establishment of regular monitoring and evaluation frameworks, with clear indicators.
 - 8.3. The periodic conduct of impact assessments of interventions dedicated to the Roma.
 - 8.4. The ensuring of transparency through the public reporting of results and oversight by civil society.
-

Conclusion

This analysis demonstrates that significant barriers impede the access of Roma youth to quality VET and their successful integration into the labor market in the Western Balkans and Türkiye. Although formal political commitments exist, it becomes apparent that implementation gaps, insufficient resources, weak coordination, and persistent discrimination undermine progress. Nevertheless, documented good practices demonstrate that comprehensive, well-funded, and long-term supported interventions can generate significant improvements. Breaking the cycle of educational and labor market exclusion of the Roma requires integrated approaches that act simultaneously at multiple levels, sustained

political commitment, adequate resources, and a genuine partnership with Roma communities.

The demographic reality, in which the Roma constitute a young and growing population, makes the investment in the education and labor market employment of Roma youth not only a moral imperative but also an economic necessity for the economic and social growth of the region. A failure to address these gaps will perpetuate the cycle of poverty, increase social assistance costs, and generate losses in productivity and income. In contrast, the successful inclusion of the Roma through quality VET pathways offers substantial financial and social benefits, contributing to economic growth, social cohesion, and the progress of European Union integration.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Context and General Framework

The Roma constitute Europe's largest ethnic minority, with an estimated population of 10-12 million people across the entire continent, including approximately 1.5-2 million in the Western Balkans and Türkiye (European Commission, 2020). Despite the long-standing recognition of Roma rights within international human rights frameworks and two decades of specific policy interventions, including the Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005-2015) and the current EU Roma Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion and Participation (2020-2030), Roma communities continue to be confronted with severe socioeconomic marginalization in all domains of life.

Educational exclusion and labor market discrimination represent central dimensions of Roma marginalization, creating intergenerational cycles of poverty that policy interventions have struggled to break. Recent and comprehensive surveys reveal persistent gaps: the 2022 survey by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) found that 80% of Roma live at risk of poverty, only 15% of young Roma adults have completed upper secondary education, and less than 30% have paid employment (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2022). These figures have changed only marginally since the benchmark FRA survey of 2011, despite substantial investments in Roma inclusion policies and programs (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2012; United Nations Development Programme, 2012).

The Western Balkans and Türkiye present a landscape of particular complexity with regard to Roma inclusion. These countries share several characteristics that shape the policy context for Vocational Education and Training (VET) and employment for the Roma:

- The EU accession context: All seven countries are at various stages of the EU accession process, which creates external incentives for policy reform and access to pre-accession

funding (IPA). However, the uncertain timeline for actual accession and the fluctuating political commitment toward European integration generate instability in policy implementation.

- The challenges of economic transition: Post-socialist economic transitions have disproportionately affected Roma communities, as traditional employment sectors (agriculture, manual labor) have contracted, while new sectors require higher levels of qualification. Youth unemployment rates in the region range between 25-45%, with Roma youth facing even higher rates (European Training Foundation, 2024; International Labour Organization, 2020).
- Weak institutional capacity: State institutions in the Western Balkans often exhibit a lack of administrative capacity, resources, and the coordination mechanisms necessary for the effective implementation of policies. This aspect is particularly acute in domains requiring inter-ministerial cooperation, such as VET systems, which involve the ministries of education, labor, social affairs, and finance (Robayo-Abril & Millán, 2019).
- Pervasive anti-gypsyism: Despite formal legal protections, Roma communities face widespread discrimination, negative stereotypes, and social prejudices that are collectively termed "anti-gypsyism" and which function as a fundamental barrier to inclusion in education, employment, access to housing, and public services (European Roma Rights Centre, 2023; Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2022).
- Geographical segregation: Many Roma live in segregated settlements with limited infrastructure, inadequate access to basic services, and physical distance from economic opportunities and educational institutions (Robayo-Abril & Millán, 2019; UNICEF, 2022).

Within this context, vocational education and training (VET) systems have been identified as potentially powerful mechanisms for facilitating the transition of Roma youth into the labor market. VET systems offer several theoretical advantages: a shorter duration than academic pathways, the development of practical skills, direct links to labor markets, and the potential for earlier economic independence (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2019). Indeed, European policy frameworks place an increasing emphasis on VET as a key pathway for youth employability and economic competitiveness, with substantial EU investments in the modernization of this form of education in the Western Balkans (Council of the European Union, 2020).

Nevertheless, empirical evidence reveals substantial implementation gaps existing between the design of VET policies and the actual results obtained for Roma youth.

Research documents that:

1. **Access barriers:** Roma students are underrepresented in VET enrollments relative to the share of the general youth population and are overrepresented in lower-quality vocational pathways (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2019).
2. **Quality issues:** Many VET programs accessible to Roma youth are situated within traditional trades characterized by low "prestige" and weak labor market demand, thereby perpetuating occupational segregation (Rostas & Kostka, 2014).
3. **Challenges related to graduation:** Roma students record higher dropout rates from VET programs due to financial pressures, discrimination, inadequate academic preparation, and a lack of support services (Open Society Institute, 2007).
4. **Weak links to the labor market:** Even in circumstances where Roma youth complete VET programs, discriminatory practices present in the hiring process and insufficient partnerships with employers significantly impede successful labor market integration (Milcher & Fischer, 2011; Robayo-Abril & Millán, 2019).

1.2 Purpose and Objectives of the Study

The study pursues four primary interconnected objectives:

1. **The assessment objective:** To critically evaluate the effectiveness of existing vocational education policies and labor market integration strategies in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Türkiye. This involves examining the coherence of policy design, implementation fidelity, the adequacy of resource allocation, coordination mechanisms among stakeholders, and measurable outcomes for Roma youth.
2. **The comparative objective:** To realize systematic comparisons between countries, identifying convergences and divergences in policy approaches, implementation models, and outcomes. The comparative dimension serves to highlight the contextual factors (legislative

frameworks, institutional arrangements, civil society engagement, the stage of EU integration) which correlate with inclusion outcomes that have presented higher success rates.

3. **The understanding objective:** To generate nuanced perspectives, anchored in context, regarding the barriers and beneficial factors operating within VET systems and labor market transitions for Roma youth, drawing upon comprehensive documentary evidence and established specialized literature.

4. **The description objective:** To provide a comprehensive mapping of the VET landscape in each country, documenting the architecture of relevant policies, institutional actors, types of programs, and funding mechanisms.

These objectives collectively sustain the final purpose of the consultancy, which is to produce actionable, evidence-based recommendations that strengthen the educational and employment pathways for Roma youth, serving as a strategic advocacy tool for REF and its partners.

1.3 Scope and coverage

Geographic Area: The study encompasses seven countries:

- Albania
- Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Kosovo
- Montenegro
- North Macedonia
- Serbia
- Türkiye

Thematic Area: The analysis focuses upon:

- Vocational education and training systems
- Transitions from school to work and labor market integration
- Roma-specific policies and targeted interventions

- General VET policies with implications for Roma inclusion
- Support services (career counseling, financial aid, mentorship, etc.)
- Anti-discrimination frameworks in education and employment

Temporal Area: The primary period of analysis covers the years 2015–2025, capturing the current policy landscape and recent reforms. The historical context from 2010–2014 provides a background regarding policy evolution.

Limitations: This study analyzes documentary evidence and published research, as well as primary data through interviews or field observations. The analysis relies upon the available secondary data, which in certain countries is limited due to inadequate data collection systems and a lack of ethnically disaggregated statistics.

CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Frameworks

The present research is based on multiple theoretical perspectives to interpret the access, participation, and labor market outcomes of Roma youth within vocational education and training (VET). In an attempt not to use just a single "theoretical lens," the study employs theoretical triangulation to capture the complex, multi-level factors that shape the educational and employment trajectories of Roma youth.

2.1.1 Human Capital Theory

Human capital theory, rooted in the works of Schultz (1961) and Becker (1964), postulates that education and training represent investments that enhance individual productivity, leading to improved labor market outcomes, including higher employment rates

and greater wage earnings. From this perspective, VET education systems function as mechanisms for human capital accumulation, providing technical skills, practical abilities, and labor-market-relevant knowledge that increase youth employability.

- Application to VET for Roma: Human capital theory might predict that increased Roma participation in quality VET programs should translate into better employment outcomes and higher earnings. However, empirical evidence from the Western Balkans reveals that, even when Roma youth obtain marketable qualifications, they face substantially lower employment rates and wages than their non-Roma peers (Milcher & Fischer, 2011; O'Higgins, 2010). This suggests that factors going beyond human capital (discrimination, employer bias) play critical roles in determining employment outcomes.
- Limitations: Human capital theory has been criticized for ignoring structural barriers, discrimination, and the unequal returns to education among different social groups (Bowles & Gintis, 1976).

2.1.2 Social Capital and Network Theory

Social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000) emphasizes that social networks, relationships, and group memberships constitute valuable resources that facilitate the flow of information, mutual support, and access to opportunities. Network theories in labor markets highlight that many jobs are filled through informal networks rather than formal applications, disadvantaging groups that lack ties to employed individuals and employers (Granovetter, 1973).

- Application to VET for Roma: The social networks of Roma communities are often characterized by strong internal bonding social capital (close-knit ties within the group) but have limited bridging ties (for example, with mainstream institutions and labor markets) (Stewart, 2013). This network isolation means that even Roma youth with VET education may lack the connections necessary to access information about job vacancies, obtain employment recommendations, or navigate selection processes. Successful VET interventions documented in the literature often include mentoring components and

employer partnerships that explicitly aim to build bridging social capital (Roma Education Fund, 2023).

2.1.3 Critical Race Theory and Structural Racism

Critical race theory and theories of structural racism emphasize that racial and ethnic inequality is embedded in institutional structures, policies, and everyday practices, not just in individual prejudices (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Antigypsyism, the systematic discrimination against Roma, operates through:

- Institutional discrimination: Policies and practices that appear neutral but disproportionately disadvantage Roma. One such example could be the presence of residency requirements for school enrollment, which disadvantages Roma from informal settlements.
- Stereotyping and stigmatization: Pervasive negative stereotypes portraying Roma as unwilling to work, educate their children, or integrate into mainstream society.
- Spatial segregation: Geographical isolation that reinforces social distance and limits access to opportunities.
- Racialized labor markets: The concentration of Roma in specific occupational niches ("Roma trades") characterized by low wages, precarity, and low social status.
- Application to VET for Roma: This theoretical framework explains how VET systems can reproduce, rather than challenge, Roma marginalization through tracking mechanisms, lower expectations, segregated schools that may support lower-quality VET programs, and employer discrimination against graduates (McGarry, 2017; Rostas & Kostka, 2014).

2.1.4 Intersectionality

Intersectionality theory, developed by Crenshaw (1989) and expanded by numerous scholars, argues that social identities (race/ethnicity, gender, class, ability, etc.) are not linear and cumulative, but intersect in unique ways, creating experiences of privilege and oppression. For Roma women, discrimination does not operate as ethnicity plus gender, but as a unique intersection, creating specific barriers (Kóczé, 2009, 2018).

- Application to VET for Roma: Gender analysis reveals that Roma girls face multiple barriers: gender norms restricting women's education and employment intersect with ethnic discrimination and poverty. Practices of early marriage, the prioritization of boys' education in families with limited resources, safety concerns in mixed environments, and the lack of female role models create specific gender-based obstacles that require tailored interventions (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2019). Similarly, rural Roma youth face distinct challenges that combine ethnic discrimination, poverty, and geographical isolation.

2.1.5 Institutional Theory

Institutional theory examines how organizational structures, norms, and practices shape behavior and outcomes (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; North, 1990). Within educational systems, institutional factors include:

- Path dependency: Historical models and structures constrain current possibilities.
- Isomorphism: Organizations adopt similar structures and practices, often prioritizing legitimacy over effectiveness.
- The existence of informal institutions: More precisely, unwritten rules, norms, and expectations that can contradict formal policies.
- Application to VET for Roma: Institutional analysis helps explain implementation gaps. There may be formal policies for Roma inclusion, but informal institutional norms (low expectations for Roma students, discriminatory attitudes among teachers, bureaucratic resistance to targeted interventions) undermine implementation. Successful policy change requires not only formal legal frameworks but also the transformation of institutional cultures and practices.

2.2 International and European Policy Context

Roma inclusion has been a priority area for European institutions for over two decades, generating substantial policy frameworks, action plans, and financial commitments.

2.2.1 EU Roma Strategic Framework 2020-2030

The EU Roma Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion and Participation 2020-2030 (European Commission, 2020) represents the current overarching policy framework guiding Roma inclusion efforts in the EU and candidate countries. The framework establishes objectives in four priority areas:

- Education: Member states should aim to:
 - Increase the participation of Roma children in quality early childhood education to reduce the gap with the general population by 2030.
 - Ensure that all Roma complete at least compulsory education; increase participation and completion of vocational and tertiary education.
- Employment: Member states should aim to:
 - Cut the employment gap between Roma and the general population by at least half by 2030.
 - Reduce the share of Roma living in households with no employed members.
- Health: Member states should aim to increase Roma access to quality healthcare services and improve health indicators.
 - Housing: Member states should aim to reduce the gap in housing deprivation and access to basic services.
 - The framework emphasizes horizontal priorities, including:
 - Combating antigypsyism and discrimination.
 - Reducing poverty and social exclusion.
 - Promoting participation through empowerment, cooperation, and trust.
 - Ensuring the mainstreaming of Roma equality and inclusion in all relevant policies.

The framework explicitly identifies VET as a critical pathway for the educational and professional advancement of Roma. Member states and candidate countries are required to develop "National Roma Strategic Frameworks" with specific objectives and measures addressing access to VET, and labor market transitions.

2.2.2 Council of the European Union Recommendation on VET (2020)

The Council Recommendation on vocational education and training for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience (Council of the European Union, 2020) establishes priorities for modernizing VET systems in Europe:

- Flexibility and modularization: Increasing the flexibility and accessibility of VET through modular structures, multiple entry/exit points in the educational system, as well as the recognition of prior learning or qualifications.
- Quality assurance: Implementing robust quality assurance mechanisms to guarantee that VET meets labor market needs and student expectations.
- Work-based learning: Expanding apprenticeships, internships, and on-the-job training components.
- Internationalization: Promoting international mobility and the recognition of VET qualifications.
- Digital and green skills: Ensuring that VET programs address digital transformation and environmental sustainability.
- Inclusiveness: Eliminating barriers to VET participation for disadvantaged groups, including the Roma.

The Recommendation provides a normative framework that the Western Balkans and Türkiye aspire to align with as part of their EU accession processes.

2.2.3 European Training Foundation (ETF) in the Western Balkans

The ETF, established in 1994, supports the reform of VET systems in EU neighborhood countries, including all seven countries in this study. ETF activities include:

- Policy advisory services: Technical assistance for governments in developing VET strategies and implementation plans.
- The Torino Process: Systematic evaluation of VET programs through evidence-based participatory policy analysis.
- Capacity building: Training for VET teachers, administrators, and policymakers.

- Regional cooperation: Facilitating knowledge exchange and peer learning among countries.
- Research and analysis: Producing country reports, thematic studies, and labor market intelligence.

ETF reports (2024) provide assessments of the functioning of VET systems in the Western Balkans, consistently identifying common challenges, including insufficient employer engagement, weak career guidance systems, inadequate teacher training, outdated curricula, and limited funding (European Training Foundation, 2024).

2.3 Review of Existing Research

This section synthesizes the main findings of research on Roma education, VET participation, and labor market integration, organized thematically.

2.3.1 Educational Exclusion and Early School Leaving

Much research documents the educational exclusion of Roma children and youth across Europe. FRA surveys (2011, 2012, 2016, 2022) provide the following statistical evidence:

- Early childhood education: Only 53% in 2016 and 44% in 2022 of Roma children aged 4-6 participate in early childhood education, compared to over 90% of the general population (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2022). This early disadvantage compounds throughout educational trajectories.
- Primary education: Although enrollment rates approach those of the general population, Roma children experience significantly higher rates of grade repetition and early school leaving. By the age of 16, approximately 70% of Roma have left school, compared to less than 10% of non-Roma youth (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2016, 2022).
- Secondary education: The gap widens dramatically at the secondary level. Only 15-17% of Roma aged 20-24 have completed upper secondary education, compared to

approximately over 80% of the general population (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2022). This represents the most critical bottleneck limiting access to VET and the labor market.

Multiple factors contribute to early school leaving among the Roma, documented in numerous researches and studies:

- **Poverty:** Poverty has been identified as the most significant predictor of school dropout among the Roma (Robayo-Abril & Millán, 2019). Families lacking resources for school supplies, transportation, adequate clothing, and food struggle to sustain their children's school attendance. Child labor (both within households and in the informal economy) competes with school attendance and is often chosen to the detriment of the latter (UNICEF, 2022).
- **Discrimination and hostile school environments:** Research has documented widespread discrimination experienced by Roma students, including verbal harassment, social exclusion by peers, lower expectations from teachers, and being blamed for behavioral issues. Such hostile environments create push factors that drive Roma students to leave school.
- **School segregation:** Rostas and Kostka (2014) demonstrated that Roma students are overrepresented in segregated schools (predominantly or exclusively Roma). Segregated schools typically have fewer resources, less qualified teachers, and lower academic standards, creating an educational disadvantage that accumulates over time.
- **Parents' low level of education:** Parents with limited formal education may be unfamiliar with educational systems, encounter difficulties in supporting homework, and have limited capacity to advocate for their children in schools (Flecha & Soler, 2013).
- **Early marriage:** Affecting especially Roma girls, early marriage (before age 18) remains prevalent in some communities, with rates exceeding 30% in certain regions (UNICEF, 2022). Once married, girls typically leave school, limiting their educational attainment and future employment prospects.

2.3.2 VET Participation and Educational Tracking

Research on Roma participation in VET systems reveals complex patterns of underrepresentation, tracking, and quality differentiation.

- **Quantitative Representation:** Comprehensive data on VET enrollment disaggregated by ethnicity remain scarce in the Western Balkans and Türkiye, reflecting broader gaps in educational statistics. However, available evidence suggests that Roma are underrepresented in VET relative to their share in the general population (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2019). More importantly, Roma students are disproportionately concentrated in low-prestige, shorter-duration VET programs in unpopular trades.
- **Tracking mechanisms:** Research has documented systematic tracking processes that channel Roma students into lower-quality educational pathways starting from primary school. Key tracking mechanisms include:
 - **Early ability grouping:** Placement in lower academic tracks based on assessments that may reflect cultural biases, language barriers, or accumulated disadvantages rather than inherent abilities.
 - **Overrepresentation in special education:** The inappropriate placement of Roma children in special education or segregated classes, limiting their future options.
 - **Teacher recommendations:** Lower teacher expectations and recommendations steer Roma students away from theoretical high schools and higher-quality VET programs.
 - **Information asymmetries:** Limited information reaching Roma families about available VET options, application procedures, and quality differences between programs.
- **Quality differentiation:** VET systems in Europe are internally stratified, with substantial quality differences between programs and institutions. Roma students are overrepresented in:
 - **Low-prestige trades** (construction workers, traditional crafts) to the detriment of emerging sectors (information technology, healthcare, etc.).
 - **Shorter-duration programs** (1-2 years) to the detriment of comprehensive 3-4 year programs that offer higher qualifications.

- School-based VET, with limited workplace practice components, to the detriment of dual systems combining school and apprenticeships.
- Institutions with weaker ties to employers and lower labor market employment outcomes.

The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2019) concluded that such tracking perpetuates occupational segregation and poverty in Roma families, instead of facilitating upward social mobility.

- VET Dropout: There is limited data on VET cycle completion rates specific to Roma students, but available resources might suggest higher dropout rates than those of non-Roma peers. Contributing factors include:
 - Financial pressures requiring immediate employment.
 - Discrimination and social exclusion within VET institutions.
 - Inadequate academic preparation for VET curricular demands.
 - Transportation difficulties and the distance between school and home.
 - Family obligations, particularly for young women.
 - Lack of career guidance and psychosocial support.

2.3.3 Labor Market Outcomes

Even when Roma youth complete VET programs, they face substantial barriers in labor market integration, resulting in lower employment rates, concentration in informal work, and wage penalties.

- Employment rates: World Bank analysis documented that, in the Western Balkans, Roma employment rates range from 23% in Bosnia and Herzegovina to 38% in Montenegro, dramatically lower than the national averages of 55-65% (Robayo-Abril & Millán, 2019). Youth employment rates are even lower, with over 60% of Roma youth classified as NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2022).
- Hiring discrimination: Multiple studies document hiring discrimination against Roma:

- O'Higgins (2010) found that Roma workers in Southeast Europe face unemployment rates 3-4 times higher than non-Roma with similar levels of education and experience.
- Experimental audit studies (limited in the Western Balkans) suggest the existence of name-based discrimination during the application selection process.
- Qualitative research reveals that employers hold stereotypical views of Roma as unreliable, untrustworthy, or lacking work ethic, leading to discriminatory exclusion (Milcher & Fischer, 2011).
- Wage penalties: When Roma manage to secure a job, they earn substantially less than non-Roma workers with equivalent qualifications. Multiple World Bank reports show that Roma in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans have significantly lower labor incomes than non-Roma and face substantial earnings and employment losses in the labor market, reflecting a persistent socio-economic gap (World Bank, 2019). These penalties reflect both discrimination and concentration in lower-quality jobs.
- Informal employment: Roma workers are disproportionately concentrated in jobs within the informal economy, which offer no social protection, job security, or legal protection. Informal work includes:
 - Day labor in construction, agriculture, and services.
 - Seasonal and temporary work.
 - Self-employment in collecting and recycling scrap materials.
 - Street vending and market trade.
 - Domestic work and care services.
 - Although informal work provides immediate income, it offers no pathway to skills development, career advancement, or social insurance (International Labour Organization, 2020).
- Occupational segregation: Roma workers are concentrated in a narrow range of occupations characterized by low wages, low social status, and precarity, creating a pattern termed "Roma trades" in some contexts. This occupational segregation reflects both supply factors (limited skills, low education) and demand factors (employer discrimination, social networks) (Stewart, 2013).

2.3.4 Good Practices and Successful Interventions

Although the overall picture is concerning, research has identified successful interventions that improve Roma participation in VET and labor market outcomes. Key elements of effective programs include:

- Comprehensive support models: The Roma Education Fund's WinForVET project (2019-2022), implemented in Albania, Kosovo, and Serbia, demonstrated significant success through comprehensive support that combined financial aid (scholarships covering tuition, materials, transportation), the provision of tutoring, mentoring, career guidance, and employer partnerships (Roma Education Fund, 2020-2022).
- Employer partnerships: Programs that establish strong partnerships with employers—including guaranteed internship placements, employer involvement in curriculum development, and employment guarantees—achieve significantly better employment outcomes. The Swiss Cooperation's dual VET pilot project in Albania adapted the Swiss dual system model (Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, 2023).
- Family involvement: Interventions that engage Roma families and communities, rather than focusing exclusively and individually on students, demonstrate higher rates of enrollment and completion in this form of education. Flecha and Soler (2013) documented the effectiveness of "dialogic learning" approaches that involve family members in schools and create community learning environments.
- Gender-specific programs: Programs that address the specific barriers faced by Roma girls and young women (including flexible scheduling, safe transportation, childcare support, and female mentors) achieve higher female participation.
- Anti-discrimination training: VET institutions that implement systematic diversity training for staff, clear anti-discrimination policies, and reporting mechanisms create more inclusive environments that support Roma student retention (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2019).
- Financial incentives for employers: Some programs use wage subsidies or tax incentives to encourage employers to hire Roma VET graduates. While evidence on long-term effectiveness is mixed, short-term subsidized employment can provide initial work

experience and references that facilitate subsequent unsubsidized employment (International Labour Organization, 2020).

2.4 Conceptual Model

Based on the theoretical frameworks and empirical literature, the present study employs a multi-level conceptual model proposing that the VET trajectories of Roma youth and their labor market outcomes are shaped by intersecting factors operating at the macro, meso, and micro levels.

Macro Level (Societal/Structural):

- Economic structure and labor market conditions
- Legal and public policy frameworks
- Antigypsyism and societal attitudes toward the Roma
- Geographical factors and spatial segregation
- The EU integration process and external pressures

Meso Level (Institutional):

- The structure, quality, and accessibility of the VET system
- Links between schools and employers, and labor market intermediation
- Career guidance and support services
- Discrimination within institutions
- Civil society capacity and advocacy activities

Micro Level (Individual/Familial):

- Family socioeconomic status and poverty
- Parents' education and aspirations
- Academic preparation and individual skills
- Social capital and social networks
- Gender norms and family structures

The model emphasizes that factors from different levels interact dynamically. For example, macro-level antigypsyism shapes meso-level institutional discrimination, which in turn influences micro-level family decisions regarding educational investment. Effective interventions must address multiple levels simultaneously, rather than focusing exclusively on individual-level factors.

CHAPTER 3: REGIONAL OVERVIEW OF VET SYSTEMS AND ROMA INCLUSION

3.1 Research design

With the aim of outlining the methodological framework, it becomes apparent that this study utilizes a mixed-methods approach, combining a systematic literature review, the analysis of public policy documents, comparative case study methodology, and qualitative data collection through written interviews addressed to relevant stakeholders. More precisely, the research design is structured around four primary objectives: the assessment, comparison, in-depth understanding, and description of Vocational Education and Training (VET) systems and Roma inclusion policies across seven countries.

For this analysis, the study adopts a critical approach to policy analysis, examining not only the official texts but also the implementation mechanisms, resource allocation, power dynamics among stakeholders, and documented outcomes. Acknowledging these complexities, it becomes evident that policy analysis must transcend official rhetoric in order to evaluate actual effects and identify the discrepancies existing between declared intentions and lived realities (Ball, 1993; Bacchi, 2009).

The research is situated within the tradition of critical social sciences, recognizing that policy analysis is never value-neutral. Instead, the study explicitly adopts a Roma rights perspective, treating educational and labor market inclusion as matters of human rights and social justice, rather than mere technical challenges of public policy.

3.2 Data collection methods

3.2.1 Document search strategy

The documentary analysis followed a systematic, multi-level approach, ensuring a comprehensive coverage of document types, countries, and themes.

➤ National legislative and policy documents:

In identifying the primary sources, the following were included:

- National constitutions and anti-discrimination legislation.
- National Roma integration strategies and action plans (2020–2030 cycle).
- Laws, regulations, and strategic frameworks regarding VET.
- Employment and labor market policies targeting youth and vulnerable groups.
- Annual reports and strategic plans of the Ministries of Education.
- National qualification frameworks and VET curricular guidelines.

As a search technique, direct access through the official portals of national governments, educational agencies, and VET councils was utilized.

➤ Reports of regional and international organizations:

In identifying the primary sources within this register, the following were included:

- Country reports and progress reports of the European Commission (IPA beneficiaries).
- Assessments conducted by the Council of Europe and the OSCE regarding Roma-related policies.
- World Bank reports concerning education and social inclusion.
- OECD assessments regarding VET and skills.
- Education monitoring reports from UNICEF and UNESCO.
- ILO studies regarding youth employment.
- Reports from the European Training Foundation (ETF) concerning VET systems.
- FRA survey data and thematic reports.
- Publications from the Open Society Foundations and the Roma Education Fund.

➤ Academic Databases:

The primary databases consulted for this study include:

- Scopus and Web of Science
- ERIC

- Google Scholar
- ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global
- JSTOR

In the search process, basic terms were combined with Boolean operators: ("Roma" OR "Romani") AND ("vocational education" OR "VET" OR "apprenticeship" etc.) AND (names of target countries in the Western Balkans and Türkiye) AND ("labour market" OR "employment" etc.). Acknowledging the temporal dimension, limits were established primarily for the 2015–2025 period, while the 2010–2014 period was utilized in a secondary capacity for context.

3.2.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

➤ Inclusion criteria:

1. Geographical relevance: Documents that directly address at least one target country or provide regional analyses.
2. Temporal relevance: A primary period of 2015–2025; fundamental documents regardless of date if they remain in force.
3. Thematic relevance: A substantive addressing of VET systems, Roma education/employment, school-to-work transitions, and anti-discrimination.
4. Types of documents: Legislation, governmental strategies, monitoring/evaluation reports, international assessments, NGO reports, peer-reviewed academic articles, etc.

Exclusion criteria: For maintaining analytical rigor, documents lacking geographical or thematic relevance were excluded, along with opinions/blogs, documents prior to the year 2010 (with the exception of fundamental ones), and documents devoid of verifiable credibility.

3.2.4 Qualitative Data Collection (Written Interviews)

In attempting to complement and validate the data obtained from documents and literature, a primary qualitative data collection was conducted. This consisted of administering written interviews-structured as open qualitative questionnaires-addressed to

a broad spectrum of stakeholders, essential in the architecture and implementation of VET systems. Acknowledging the diversity of perspectives, the targeted groups included:

- Beneficiaries of VET education: Students, in order to capture direct experience, the obstacles encountered, and employment prospects.
- VET schools and institutions: Teaching staff and school leadership, evaluating the reality on the ground, as well as pedagogical and inclusion-related challenges.
- Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs): Civil society entities active in Roma rights and education, providing an independent advocacy and monitoring perspective.
- Employers: Companies and economic agents involved in the dual system or who absorb labor from the VET system, to evaluate the relevance of skills within the labor market.
- Ministries: Representatives of the Ministries of Education and Labor, to clarify policy intentions, funding mechanisms, and institutional bottlenecks.

3.3 Data Analysis

3.3.1 Analysis of Documentary and Qualitative Data

Phase 1: Deductive coding framework: A preliminary structure was developed-based on CEDEFOP (2020) and the EU Strategic Framework-targeting: policy architecture, access, quality, equity, transition support, monitoring, and resources.

Phase 2: Inductive coding for emerging themes: Identifying innovative practices, unintended consequences, or stakeholder resistance.

Phase 3: Pattern analysis and synthesis: National policy profiles, cross-country comparison matrices, and the analysis of the gap between policy intentions and implementation realities.

3.3.2 Comparative Analysis Strategy

As a means of identify structural patterns, a structured comparison methodology was utilized to observe: Convergences (common models), Divergences (significant differences in approach), and Outliers (countries with notably better or worse results).

3.4 Triangulation and Synthesis

Acknowledging the complexity of the phenomenon, a multi-level triangulation strategy was employed:

1. Triangulation of data sources: Integrating evidence from policy documents, international reports, academic research, and primary data (stakeholder responses from written interviews).
2. Triangulation of methods: Combining documentary analysis, qualitative interviews, statistical analysis, and comparative case studies.
3. Triangulation of theories: Utilizing Human Capital Theory, Critical Race Theory, intersectionality, and institutional theory.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Acknowledging that this research involves both documentary analysis and the collection of data from human subjects, ethical considerations possess a fundamental importance. Narratives based on deficit or stereotypes were avoided. Regarding the written interviews, informed consent was ensured, and the identity and responses of beneficiaries and vulnerable participants were protected through anonymization.

3.6 Research Limitations

Data availability: It becomes apparent that statistical data regarding enrollment, graduation, and employment in the VET system, disaggregated by ethnic criteria, remain limited or non-existent in several countries.

1. Constraints of primary data: Data was collected directly from participants through written interviews, a fact which may reduce the nuances that non-verbal language or dynamic dialogue might have provided.
2. Publication bias: Existing literature may overrepresent successes while underreporting failed programs.
3. Temporal gap: The most recent consolidated statistical data date from 2022–2023.

4. Heterogeneity of the Roma population: The analysis uses "Roma" as a unitary category, although it recognizes the substantial internal diversity of this group.

CHAPTER 4: REGIONAL OVERVIEW OF VET SYSTEMS AND ROMA INCLUSION

4.1 The VET Landscape in the Western Balkans and Türkiye

With the goal of understanding the institutional landscapes of the region, it becomes apparent that the seven countries examined in this study share certain common characteristics within their VET systems, while simultaneously presenting significant variations that reflect diverse historical legacies, economic structures, and specific reform trajectories.

4.1.1 Historical Context

Acknowledging the historical dimension, one can observe that all the countries, with the exception of Türkiye, possess socialist legacies that have profoundly shaped their VET systems. Under these socialist regimes, vocational education was highly developed and strictly integrated into state-planned economies; VET schools were frequently attached to specific factories or enterprises, thereby ensuring direct pathways from education to employment. Nevertheless, the post-socialist transitions of the 1990s disrupted these established arrangements:

- The closure of factories eliminated traditional employer partners for VET schools.
- Economic restructuring reduced the demand for industrial skills, while simultaneously increasing the demand for competencies within the service sector.
- The capacity of the state to maintain and modernize VET infrastructure diminished during periods of economic crisis.
- The phenomenon of "brain drain" and the migration of teachers reduced the quality of instruction within the VET sector.

Analyzing this observation, it becomes evident that the transition period created persistent challenges-including outdated equipment, curricula unaligned with market

demands, reduced employer involvement, and a declining social prestige of VET relative to academic pathways (Bartlett, 2013; Bartlett & Pagliarello, 2016; European Training Foundation, 2024). Türkiye, although it did not experience a socialist transition, confronted its own unique challenges within the VET sector, including rapid urbanization, economic transformation, and the necessity of balancing traditional apprenticeship systems with modern, school-based VET.

4.1.2 Current Structures of the VET System

➤ ISCED Level Classification:

With the objective of classifying the provision of VET within the region, it becomes apparent that it is situated primarily at ISCED levels 3 (upper secondary education) and 4 (post-secondary non-tertiary education):

- ISCED 3: Programs of 3–4 years for students aged 15–18/19, leading to qualifications equivalent to upper secondary education.
- ISCED 4: Shorter post-secondary programs (1–2 years) for students who have completed upper secondary education.

Furthermore, certain countries also offer short-cycle tertiary VET programs at ISCED level 5.

➤ Types of Programs:

In the area of program configurations, the VET systems in the region offer several distinct models:

1. School-based VET: Characterized primarily by classroom instruction with limited practical components, this remains the dominant model in most countries, despite being criticized for its weak links to the labor market.
2. Dual systems: These models combine theoretical instruction in school with extended on-the-job apprenticeships. More precisely, dual VET models are being piloted or introduced gradually in the region with the support of development agencies from

Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, although their implementation remains limited (Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, 2023).

3. Apprenticeship systems: Traditional master-apprentice frameworks, prevalent particularly in Türkiye and in certain trades-such as hairdressing, auto repair, and construction-in other countries. These frequently function as informal or semi-formal frameworks situated outside official VET structures.
4. Adult VET and continuous learning: Short-term courses and retraining programs for adults, often provided by employment services or private providers. These represent a significant dimension for Roma adults who lack initial VET qualifications.

4.1.3 Governance and Institutional Frameworks

With the aim of analyze the coordination of VET systems, it becomes apparent that the involvement of multiple ministries and agencies creates specific coordination challenges:

- Ministries of Education: Possessing primary responsibility for VET legislation, curriculum, teacher standards, and school oversight.
- Ministries of Labor/Employment: Responsible for active labor market policies, employment services, and on-the-job apprenticeships.
- Ministries of Finance: Overseeing budgetary allocation and fiscal policy.
- Social Partners: Employer associations and trade unions, theoretically involved in VET governance through tripartite bodies, although their actual influence varies significantly.
- National Qualification Authorities: Agencies responsible for the development of national qualification frameworks, quality assurance, and accreditation, often established in recent years with EU support.
- Schools and VET Centers: Responsible for decentralized implementation with varying levels of autonomy.

Analyzing the ETF report (2024), it becomes evident that challenges regarding the governance of VET systems persist, emphasizing the necessity of strengthening stakeholder involvement (including employers) in the planning, implementation, and monitoring of education and labor policies across the participating countries.

4.1.4 Enrollment Patterns and Trends

➤ General VET Enrollment:

In attempting to analyze the distribution of students within upper secondary education, a marked predilection for vocational education and training (VET) programs within the Western Balkans becomes apparent, with rates exceeding 70% in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia; meanwhile, Albania exhibits the lowest participation in the region, situated below 20% (Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2023; Eurostat, 2024; INSTAT Albania, 2023). This educational structure reflects national priorities aimed at aligning competencies with labor market demands, although it is noted that the effective share varies significantly among the states monitored by the European Training Foundation (European Training Foundation, 2023; Kosovo Agency of Statistics, 2023).

Table: Share of VET enrollment in upper secondary education (2022-2023 Data)

Country	VET Share (%)	Primary Source
Bosnia and Herzegovina	75,3%	Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2023)
Serbia	73,1%	Eurostat (2024)
Montenegro	67,5%	Eurostat (2024) / ETF (2023)
North Macedonia	58,2%	Eurostat (2024)
Kosovo	52,1%	Kosovo Agency of Statistics (2023)
Türkiye	33,7%*	Eurostat (2024)
Albania	18,2%	INSTAT Albania (2023) / Eurostat (2024)

Analyzing these rates, it becomes evident that they reflect both supply factors-referring to the availability of VET programs-and demand factors, pertaining to the

preferences of students and their families. In several countries, VET is perceived as a "second choice" pathway for students unable to access theoretical high schools, a phenomenon which contributes to societal stigmatization (Bartlett & Pagliarello, 2016).

- Gender patterns: Within this register, VET enrollment exhibits a pronounced gender segregation across all countries:
 - Male students predominate within technical trades, such as electronics, construction, and auto mechanics.
- Female students are concentrated within the care sectors, including health and education, and in trades traditionally associated with the feminine sphere, such as hygiene and hospitality.
- Urban-rural patterns: Acknowledging the spatial dimension, one can observe that VET institutions are disproportionately concentrated in urban areas, thereby creating barriers of access for youth from rural environments. More precisely, quality VET programs are concentrated primarily in capital cities and major regional centers.

4.2 Roma Demographics and Socioeconomic Context

4.2.1 Population size and distribution

In striving to estimate the size of the Roma population, several methodological challenges emerge, arising from:

- Underreporting in census data, as many Roma do not self-identify for fear of discrimination.
- The absence of standardized definitions.
- Political sensitivities.

Estimated Roma Populations:

Analyzing the discrepancy between official figures and demographic reality, it becomes apparent that census data often indicate conservative numbers, as is the case in Serbia with 131,936 individuals, while estimates from the Council of Europe suggest a real population of approximately 600,000 (Council of Europe, 2012; Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2023). This underrepresentation in official data, caused by specific socio-

economic and political factors, is further confirmed by recent analyses from the World Bank and the Regional Cooperation Council, which emphasize the necessity of inclusion policies based on estimated populations-reaching over 2.7 million in Türkiye (Regional Cooperation Council, 2022; Robayo-Abril & Millán, 2019).

Table: Roma Population – Official Data vs. Council of Europe (CoE) Estimates

Country	Census (Official)	CoE Estimate (Mean/Interval)	Difference (Estimate vs. Census)
Bosnia and Herzegovina	131.936 (2022)	400.000 – 600.000	~4x higher
Serbia	46.433 (2021)	197.000 (170k – 260k)	~4x higher
Montenegro	8.301 (2011)*	115.000 (80k – 150k)	~14x higher
North Macedonia	12.583 (2013)	58.000 (40k – 76k)	~4.5x higher
Kosovo	6.251 (2011)	20.000 (15k – 30k)	~3x higher
Türkiye	35.784 (2011)**	45.000 (35k – 50k)	~1.3x higher
Albania	No official data	2.750.000 (500k – 5M)	N/A

**Data for the 2023 Albanian Census are currently undergoing detailed processing, but historical figures remain low.*

***Includes Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian (RAE) communities, which are frequently grouped in statistics.*

In working to characterize the Roma populations, several distinct features emerge:

- Youth: Acknowledging the demographic composition, it becomes apparent that Roma populations are significantly younger than national averages, with approximately 43% under the age of 18, compared to 20–25% within the general population (UNICEF, 2022).
- Urban and peri-urban concentration: Although some Roma reside in rural areas, one can observe that many are concentrated at the urban peripheries and in peri-urban settlements.
- Segregation: Residential segregation remains a pronounced element, with many Roma living in neighborhoods or settlements that are predominantly or exclusively Roma, characterized by limited infrastructure.

4.2.2 Socioeconomic Indicators

- Poverty: Focusing on the socioeconomic dimension, the Roma are confronted with extreme poverty rates in comparison to general populations:
 - 80% of the Roma in the region live at risk of poverty, compared to approximately 20–25% within the general population (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2022).
 - 62% of Roma children reside in households facing severe material deprivation (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2022).
 - Income gaps between Roma and non-Roma remain substantial, varying from 35% to over 50%, depending on the country (Robayo-Abril & Millán, 2019).
- Housing:
 - Approximately 37% of the Roma do not have access to indoor running water within their homes (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2022).
 - 52% do not possess an indoor toilet facility (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2022).
 - Many Roma reside in informal settlements without legal property titles, a fact which creates insecurity and establishes barriers to accessing services.
- Health:
 - In terms of health outcomes, the life expectancy of the Roma is approximately 10 years lower than national averages (European Commission, 2014).
 - Higher rates of chronic diseases, infant mortality, and preventable illnesses are frequently observed.

- Limited health insurance coverage and restricted access to medical assistance further compound these issues.

Acknowledging these structural conditions, it becomes evident that such socioeconomic factors create fundamental barriers to educational participation, as families struggling with extreme poverty are compelled to prioritize immediate survival needs over long-term educational investments.

4.3 The Policy Architecture for Roma Inclusion

4.3.1 The EU Roma Strategic Framework and National Strategies

In attempting to understand the institutional response to marginalization, it becomes apparent that all seven countries have adopted National Roma Integration Strategies aligned with the EU Roma Strategic Framework for Roma 2020–2030, although they exhibit varying levels of ambition and implementation capacity (European Commission, 2020).

➤ Common elements within National Strategies:
Analyzing these strategic documents, one can identify several recurring objectives:

1. Educational objectives: Specifically, an increase in participation in early childhood education, the reduction of early school leaving, and the elevation of graduation rates in upper secondary education.
2. Employment objectives: Aimed at reducing unemployment among the Roma, increasing formal employment, and narrowing the employment gaps relative to the general population.
3. Anti-discrimination: Involving the consolidation of legal frameworks, awareness campaigns, and the establishment of enforcement mechanisms.
4. Multi-stakeholder coordination: The creation of coordinating bodies that integrate government entities, civil society, and Roma representatives.

➤ Variations:

Within this register, significant divergences emerge:

- Specificity: Certain strategies include concrete numerical targets, while others utilize a more vague, aspirational language.
 - Budgetary allocation: The funding dedicated specifically to Roma inclusion varies dramatically, ranging from almost non-existent levels to modest allocations.
 - Monitoring mechanisms: While some strategies establish clear indicators and reporting timelines, others lack operational monitoring frameworks entirely.
- Critical Assessment:
- Acknowledging the results of multiple evaluations conducted by the European Commission and the Council of Europe, as well as alternative civil society reports, several common weaknesses become apparent:
- Implementation gaps: A weak translation of strategic objectives into actual operational programs.
 - Insufficient resources: Budgetary allocations remain inadequate for the achievement of declared targets.
 - Limited Roma participation: Despite the rhetoric of inclusion, Roma civil society possesses limited influence over the design and implementation of policies.
 - Lack of accountability: The presence of weak enforcement mechanisms when targets are not met.

4.3.2 Legal and Constitutional Frameworks

All seven countries possess constitutional provisions that guarantee equality and prohibit discrimination, alongside specific anti-discrimination legislation. Nevertheless, it becomes apparent that the enforcement of the law remains deficient due to:

- Limited resources allocated to equality bodies and ombudsmen.
- Reduced awareness among the Roma regarding their rights and the mechanisms for submitting complaints.
- Lengthy legal processes and limited resolutions.
- Substantial difficulties in proving discrimination in legal cases.

4.4 Comparative Presentation of Roma Youth in VET

4.4.1 Available Statistical Data

In attempting to quantify participation, we discover that complete and comparable data regarding Roma involvement in VET across the seven countries are extremely limited, primarily due to:

1. The absence of ethnic data collection: Most countries do not systematically collect educational statistics disaggregated by ethnic criteria.
2. Privacy concerns: Data protection regulations frequently restrict the collection of ethnic data.
3. Sampling challenges: The small sample sizes of Roma in general education surveys limit the reliability of estimates.

4.5 Regional Models: Convergences and Divergences

4.5.1 Convergent Models

Common challenges identified across all countries:

1. Severe educational exclusion: Roma are dramatically underrepresented in upper secondary education, including VET.
2. Poverty as a primary barrier: Extreme poverty creates insurmountable financial obstacles.
3. Discrimination and anti-gypsyism: Pervasive negative attitudes toward the Roma affect access, quality of education, and labor market outcomes.
4. Implementation gaps: Formal policies are inadequately implemented due to resource constraints and weak institutional capacity.
5. Data deficits: The lack of systematic monitoring of Roma educational outcomes hinders the development of evidence-based policies.

4.5.2 Divergent Models

- Variations in VET system structure:

- Serbia maintains the highest general enrollment rate in VET, offering a greater number of available places.
- Kosovo possesses the least developed VET infrastructure.
- Türkiye demonstrates a continuity in the implementation of the apprenticeship system that is not found elsewhere.
- Variations in civil society capacity:
 - Serbia and North Macedonia possess the strongest Roma civil society sectors, with the capacity to monitor policy implementation.
 - Bosnia and Herzegovina exhibits the weakest Roma civil society capacity.
- Variations in EU integration progress:
 - Countries with more advanced EU integration (Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia) show a greater alignment of policies with EU frameworks.
 - The stalled EU accession process of Türkiye reduces external pressure for reform.
- Variations in Resource Allocation:
 - Certain countries, such as Serbia, allocate modest budgets dedicated specifically to Roma education.
 - Others, most notably Bosnia and Herzegovina, present the most fragile and inconsistent funding structures.

CHAPTER 5: COUNTRY PROFILES

This chapter presents detailed profiles for each of the seven countries, evaluating their VET system structures, policies dedicated to Roma people, available statistics, and implementation results. Each profile follows a common structure to facilitate cross-country comparison.

5.1 ALBANIA

5.1.1 Country Context

Basic indicators:

- **Population:** 2.40 million (2023 Census) (INSTAT, 2024). Demographic decline continues to influence the labor market and educational demand.
- **EU Status:** Candidate country, advancing on the path of European integration—a process that requires not only economic growth but also the social inclusion of vulnerable groups (European Union External Action, 2016).
- **Roma Population:** Although the 2011 census indicated a figure of 8,301, Council of Europe estimates place the real number between 80,000 and 120,000. The Roma community consistently faces the highest poverty and unemployment rates in the country (Duli & Bino, 2016). Data published by INSTAT Albania in June 2024 indicate a slight increase in the number of people self-identifying as Roma, reaching 9,813 (approximately 0.4% of the total population).

➤ **Economic**

Context:

Albania faces a dual challenge: stimulating economic growth while ensuring social cohesion. The government has identified Vocational Education and Training (VET) as a primary tool to combat youth unemployment and facilitate the school-to-work transition (National Employment and Skills Strategy 2023-2030, 2024). However, disparities persist: according to 2024-2025 INSTAT data, unemployment and lack of

qualifications remain critical barriers. The youth unemployment rate (15-24 years) in Albania has stabilized around 21%, but the inactivity rate (NEET) remains above 24%.

5.1.2 VET System Structure and Governance

Legislative and institutional framework:

The VET system is structured within the Albanian Qualifications Framework (AQF), revised in 2018 to align with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) (Cedefop & ETF, 2025). Governance is ensured by:

- **Ministry of Economy, Culture and Innovation (MECI):** Responsible for strategic coordination (taking over the duties of the former Ministry of Finance and Economy).
- **National Employment and Skills Agency (NAES):** Manages the network of public VET providers (schools and training centers).
- **National Agency for VET and Qualifications (NAVETQ):** Develops occupational standards and curricula (European Training Foundation [ETF], 2022).
- **National Strategy:** The core policy document is the National Employment and Skills Strategy (NESS) 2023-2030. It sets two major objectives: developing skills for a better match with the labor market and promoting decent employment through inclusive policies, explicitly aiming at integrating vulnerable groups into the VET system (Ministry of Economy, Culture and Innovation, 2024).

5.1.3 Roma Population: Educational Challenges and Systemic Barriers

Although the policy framework is robust, there is a major disconnect between government intentions and the lived reality of young Roma.

- **Critical Educational Gaps:** Research indicates alarming rates of dropout and non-participation that affect eligibility for VET:
 - According to historical baseline data, 55% of Roma children aged 6 to 9 did not attend compulsory education.
 - According to the National Action Plan (2021-2025), there is a critical 31% gap in participation in compulsory education between Roma children and the majority population, with the enrollment rate being only 66%. Roma girls are at high risk of early school leaving, a phenomenon fueled by community pressures and the prevalence of early marriage (a previous study indicated that 31% of Roma girls aged 13–17 were already married). This premature dropout

drastically limits subsequent access to VET and the labor market (Ministry of Health and Social Protection, 2021).

- **Information Gap:** Access to VET programs is hindered by a significant information gap and minimum educational requirements that are often too high for the community's schooling level. Approximately 90% of Roma and 78% of Egyptians classify themselves as having no profession, being trapped in the informal sector. This disconnect is exacerbated by the lack of Roma employees in employment offices; the National Plan emphasizes the critical need for employment mediators to ensure effective communication between institutions and marginalized communities (Ministry of Health and Social Protection, 2021).
- **Financial Barriers and Opportunity Cost:** Poverty remains the ultimate barrier. Although support mechanisms exist, such as Council of Ministers Decision (DCM) No. 666 (scholarships, free textbooks), these are often insufficient to cover real living costs, such as dormitory rent or transport. Financial precarity forces many young Roma to enter the informal labor market (e.g., collecting recyclable waste), which can generate higher immediate income than a minimum wage job, creating disinterest in vocational training (Duli & Bino, 2016).

5.1.4 National Roma Integration Strategy

The Albanian government has implemented the National Action Plan for Equality, Inclusion, and Participation of Roma and Egyptians (2021-2025). It prioritizes education and employment, including specific measures such as:

- Granting scholarships and tuition fee exemptions.
- Establishing special quotas in higher education and VET programs.
- "Second chance" programs to complete compulsory education.

However, implementation is slowed by institutional weaknesses. The slow adoption of secondary legislation and the lack of disaggregated data make it difficult to monitor progress. For instance, official reports show discrepancies: in 2018, the number of Roma VET graduates was reported differently by various sources, highlighting the lack of a standardized data collection methodology.

5.1.5 Quality and Relevance of VET for the Labor Market

For VET to be an attractive option, it must lead to meaningful employment. Tracer studies show mixed results:

- **Employment Rates:** A 2024 study found that the employment rate for graduates in Tourism and Hospitality was 85.8%, while for the Economics-Business field, it was significantly lower at 60.4% (Swisscontact, 2024).
- **Market Alignment:** The establishment of Sector Skills Committees (SSCs) has been slow; in 2023, only two of the ten planned committees (ICT and Tourism) were fully operational (Ministry of Economy, Culture and Innovation, 2024). This suggests that the VET system is still struggling to adapt curricula to the real needs of the economy, which directly affects the employability of Roma graduates.

5.1.6

Recommendations

Necessary Interventions: Analysis of current policies suggests the need to move from legislative frameworks to targeted implementation:

1. **Mediation and Guidance:** Hiring Roma mediators in VET centers to bridge the information deficit.
2. **Restructuring Financial Support:** Scholarships must cover subsistence costs (accommodation/meals), not just teaching materials, to offset the opportunity cost of informal work.
3. **Preparatory Programs:** Creating "bridge" programs for 14-17-year-olds who have dropped out of school to develop the basic skills required for VET enrollment.

5.2 SERBIA

5.2.1 National Context

Basic indicators:

- **Population:** 6.6 million (2023 estimate based on the 2022 census).
- **GDP per capita:** 13,696 USD (World Bank, 2025).

- **EU Status:** Candidate country since 2012; accession negotiations are ongoing, with 22 out of 35 chapters opened (European Commission, 2023).
- **Roma Population:**
 - Official (2022 Census): 131,936 (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2023).
 - Estimated (Council of Europe): An average of 600,000 (Range: 400,000–800,000) (Council of Europe, 2012).
- **Economic Context:** Serbia is the largest economy in the Western Balkans. Although unemployment has fallen to historic lows (9.1% in Q4 2023), youth unemployment remains high, at approximately 24-25% (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2024). The economy is shifting towards services and foreign direct investment (FDI) in manufacturing, increasing the demand for skilled technical labor.

5.2.2 Structure of the Vocational Education and Training (VET) System Governance:

- **Ministry of Education:** Holds primary responsibility for policies and curricula.
- **Office for Dual Education and the National Qualifications Framework:** A specialized body established to manage the dual system and implement the NQF.
- **Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation (ZUOV):** Develops VET programs and standards.

VET Offer:

Serbia maintains a robust tradition in the VET system, having the highest participation rate in the region:

- **Enrollment:** 73.1% of upper secondary education students are enrolled in VET programs (Eurostat, 2024).
- **Structure:**

- 3-year profiles: Direct entry into the labor market (trades).
- 4-year profiles: Technical education providing access to university or employment.
- Post-secondary VET: Specialized education (Level 5).

Dual Education System:

Regulated by the Law on Dual Education (2017, amended in 2023), the system has expanded significantly:

- **Scale:** In the 2023/2024 school year, approximately 16,000 students were enrolled in dual profiles across 186 schools, cooperating with over 900 companies.
- **Model:** Students receive compensation for "work-based learning" (at least 70% of the minimum hourly wage) (Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Serbia, 2023).

5.2.3 Roma Population and Socio-economic Status

Despite the decrease recorded in the census, Serbia is home to one of the largest Roma populations in Europe. Significant concentrations exist in Belgrade, Niš, and the Vojvodina region.

Socio-economic indicators (FRA 2022 & UNICEF MICS 2020 data):

- **Poverty:** 82% of Roma in Serbia live at risk of poverty, compared to the national average of approximately 20% (EU Agency for Fundamental Rights [FRA], 2022).
- **Severe material deprivation:** 60% of Roma suffer from severe material deprivation (FRA, 2022).
- **NEET Rate:** 47% of young Roma (16-24 years old) are not in employment, education, or training (NEET) (FRA, 2022).

Housing and infrastructure:

- 10% of Roma live in households without running water inside the home.
- 82% live in overcrowded households (FRA, 2022).

5.2.4 National Strategy for Roma Integration

Serbia is implementing the Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma for the Period 2022-2030, aligned with the EU Roma Strategic Framework.

Strategic Priorities and Targets (2030):

1. **Education:** Reducing the gap in upper secondary education completion; target of 60% enrollment in secondary education for Roma pupils.
2. **Employment:** Increasing the Roma employment rate; focus on formalizing undeclared work.
3. **Housing:** Legalizing informal settlements and relocation from substandard areas.
4. **Health:** Increasing life expectancy and health insurance coverage.
Implementation: The Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue coordinates the strategy. However, the budget remains heavily dependent on EU pre-accession funds (IPA) (European Commission, 2023).

5.2.5 VET Policies and Roma Inclusion

- **Affirmative Action:** Serbia applies a system of "affirmative measures" for enrollment in secondary schools. Roma students can be admitted to vocational schools with slightly lower exam scores, provided they meet a minimum threshold, with the goal of stimulating participation in 4-year technical profiles.
- **Pedagogical Assistants:** There are over 260 pedagogical assistants (mostly of Roma ethnicity) employed in Serbian schools. They act as mediators between the school, the student, and the family, significantly reducing school dropout rates (UNICEF, 2022).
- **Scholarships:**
 - The Ministry of Education, often supported by IPA funds, offers specific scholarships for Roma high school students (approx. €50/month).
 - **Conditionality:** Linked to school attendance and grade point average.

5.2.6 Documented Interventions and Results

- **Roma Education Fund (REF) Interventions:** Projects such as the "Mentoring Program for Roma High School students at a national level" focus on vocational training and tertiary scholarships. REF data indicate that graduation rates for their beneficiaries in vocational streams exceed 85%, significantly higher than the national average for Roma (Roma Education Fund, 2022).
- **"Opportunity" (Prilika) Program:** Supported by the German Development Bank (KfW) and implemented by local NGOs, this program provides financial support and mentoring to Roma students in secondary vocational schools to prevent dropout. Results showed a retention rate of over 90% among beneficiaries.

5.2.7 Statistical Data

Education Level (Roma vs. General Population):

- **Completion of Upper Secondary Education (20-24 age group):**
 - General Population: ~94%
 - Roma Population: 46% (FRA, 2022).

5.2.8 Key Challenges and Opportunities

Challenges:

1. **Digital Divide:** The lack of IT equipment at home puts Roma students at a disadvantage in modern VET curricula, which rely increasingly on digital literacy.
2. **Workplace Discrimination:** The transition from school to work is the "critical point"; Roma VET graduates face a rejection rate twice as high as their non-Roma peers during job interviews (Robayo-Abril & Millán, 2019).
3. **Intergenerational Poverty:** The need for young people to contribute to household income leads to early school leaving, often before finishing the final year of VET.

Opportunities:

1. **Short-Cycle Higher Education:** New legislation allows for short-cycle studies (Level 5), providing a faster route to qualification for young Roma.
2. **Green Economy Jobs:** Serbia's focus on energy efficiency (supported by the EU Green Agenda) can create new VET profiles.

5.3 NORTH MACEDONIA

5.3.1 National Context

Basic indicators:

- **Population:** 1.83 million (2021 Census) (State Statistical Office, 2022).
- **GDP per capita:** 9,291 USD (2024 estimate) (World Bank, 2024).
- **EU Status:** Candidate country since 2005; accession negotiations officially began in July 2022, and the bilateral screening process is underway (European Commission, 2023).
- **Roma Population:**
 - Official (2021 Census): 46,433 people, representing 2.53% of the population (State Statistical Office, 2022).
 - Estimated (Council of Europe): An average of 197,000 (Range: 134,000–260,000), which would represent approximately 9-10% of the population (Council of Europe, 2012).
- **Economic Context:**

The economy of North Macedonia is small, open, and strongly integrated with the EU through trade. Although the unemployment rate has consistently declined, reaching approximately 11.6% in 2025, the labor market faces major structural issues. Youth

unemployment (15-24 years) remains at an alarming level of approximately 30% (State Statistical Office, 2025). In parallel, foreign investors report an acute shortage of technically skilled labor, which has placed VET reform at the center of economic policies.

5.3.2 Structure of the Vocational Education and Training (VET) System Governance:

- **Ministry of Education and Science (MES):** The primary authority responsible for developing educational policies and the legislative framework.
- **VET Centre (Center for Vocational Education and Training):** A key institution that develops occupational standards and national curricula and coordinates social dialogue with the private sector.
- **Sectoral Councils:** Tripartite bodies (government, employers, unions) designed to align educational supply with the real demands of the labor market.

VET Offer: The VET system is the main educational path at the secondary level in North Macedonia, attracting the majority of middle school graduates:

- **Enrollment:** Approximately 60% of upper secondary education students are enrolled in VET programs (European Commission, 2023).
- **Structure:**
 - 2- and 3-year VET: Vocational programs dedicated to trades, with direct entry into the labor market.
 - 4-year VET (Technical): Offers advanced technical qualification and the possibility to sit for the "Matura" exam for access to higher education.
 - Post-secondary VET: Specialized education (Level 5) for deepening skills.

Dual Education System:

Since 2019, North Macedonia has aggressively implemented the "dual education" model, supported by Swiss and German projects:

- **Scale:** In the 2023/2024 school year, the number of dual classes grew to over 250, involving active partnerships with over 500 companies.
- **Model:** Based on public-private partnerships where students spend increased time in the workplace (learning by doing), receiving a monthly allowance subsidized by the state and, in some cases, supplemented by employers (Ministry of Education and Science, 2023).

5.3.3 Roma Population and Socio-economic Status

North Macedonia is distinguished by the existence of the municipality of Šuto Orizari (near Skopje), the only administrative unit in the world with a Roma majority and a Roma mayor, where the Romani language is official. However, outside this enclave, exclusion remains severe.

Socio-economic indicators (FRA 2022 data & national statistics):

- **Poverty:** 75% of Roma in North Macedonia live at risk of poverty, an extremely high rate compared to the national average (EU Agency for Fundamental Rights [FRA], 2022). 79% of Roma children aged 0-17 are at risk of poverty.
- **Severe material deprivation:** 62% of Roma suffer from severe material deprivation, being unable to afford basic necessities (meat/protein, adequate heating, etc.), and 69% of Roma children aged 0-17 are in this situation (FRA, 2022).
- **NEET Rate:** 60% of young Roma (16-24 years old) are not in employment, education, or training (NEET) (FRA, 2022).
- **Housing and infrastructure:**
 - 7% of Roma live in households without running water inside the home.
 - 90% live in overcrowded households, which is the highest rate among all countries analyzed in the FRA report (FRA, 2022).
 - 50% live in poor housing conditions.

5.3.4 National Strategy for Roma Integration

The government is implementing the Strategy for Roma Inclusion 2022-2030, coordinated by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy and aligned with the EU Strategic Framework.

Strategic Priorities and Targets (2030):

1. **Education:** Reducing segregation in schools and increasing the transition rate to secondary education (VET), with a focus on finishing studies.
2. **Employment:** Reducing the employment rate gap and stimulating formal Roma entrepreneurship.
3. **Housing:** Legalizing informal settlements and improving infrastructure (water/sewerage).
4. **Anti-gypsyism and digitalization:** Combating institutional discrimination and digital inclusion of marginalized communities.

Implementation: Although the legal framework is robust, the European Commission notes that local implementation is often slowed by the lack of dedicated budgets at the municipal level (European Commission, 2023).

5.3.5 VET Policies and Roma Inclusion

- **Affirmative Action (Quotas):** Roma students benefit from a preferential enrollment policy in public high schools (including VET), which involves a 10% reduction in the minimum score required for admission. This has facilitated the access of many young people to elite technical schools.
- **Educational Mediators:** The role of mediators is institutionalized. Over 40 municipalities benefit from their services to ensure the link between the school and Roma families, being a crucial factor in preventing early school leaving.
- **Scholarships and Tutoring:** The Ministry of Education offers a national scholarship program for Roma high school students (approx. 30-60 EUR/month), conditioned on attendance and performance. The program has been expanded through partnerships with NGOs to include mandatory mentoring (Roma Education Fund, 2022).

5.3.6 Documented Interventions and Results

- **USAID Project for Roma Youth Inclusion:** This program focuses on facilitating paid internships and certifying skills acquired in the informal system. Preliminary results indicate a 40% increase in employability for participants who completed short vocational training courses (USAID, 2023).
- **REDI Initiative (Roma Entrepreneurship Development Initiative):** In North Macedonia, REDI plays an active role in supporting Roma entrepreneurs, especially in the green economy sector (collection and recycling). By formalizing Roma cooperatives, a bridge is created between the informal economy and the VET system, offering success models and apprenticeship opportunities.

5.3.7 Statistical Data

Education Level (Roma vs. General Population): According to verified data from the FRA 2022 report (Table 6), discrepancies remain significant, although there is progress compared to the previous decade.

- **Completion of upper secondary education (20-24 age group):**
 - General Population: 94%
 - Roma Population: 41% (FRA, 2022).
- **Early school leavers (18-24 age group):**
 - Roma Population: 60% (compared to a much lower rate for the general population) (FRA, 2024).

5.3.8 Key Challenges and Opportunities

Challenges:

1. **Extreme overcrowding (90%):** The fact that 9 out of 10 Roma live in overcrowded conditions directly affects students' ability to study at home, contributing to low school performance and dropout in VET.

2. **School segregation:** The phenomenon persists in certain areas, affecting the quality of primary education and, implicitly, the preparation of Roma students for the rigors of dual or technical education.
3. **Labor migration:** The massive exodus to Western Europe also affects the Roma community, with many young people trained in the VET system choosing to emigrate immediately after graduation.

Opportunities:

1. **Regional VET Centers:** The government is transforming technical high schools into "Regional VET Centers of Excellence." Ensuring equitable access for Roma in these modern centers could change the community's professional trajectory.
2. **Digital Skills:** Initiatives like "Roma Digital Boost" take advantage of the relatively good digital infrastructure to provide young people with IT skills (design, marketing), bypassing local discrimination barriers through freelancing.

5.4 BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

5.4.1 National Context

Basic indicators:

- **Population:** 3.53 million (according to the last 2013 Census), though current estimates indicate a decline to approx. 3.2 million due to emigration (Agency for Statistics of BiH, 2022).
- **GDP per capita:** 9,358 USD (World Bank, 2023).
- **EU Status:** Candidate country since December 2022; accession negotiations were officially opened in March 2024, conditional on reforms (European Commission, 2024).
- **Roma Population:**
 - Official (2013 Census): 12,583 people (0.35% of the population).

- Estimated (Council of Europe): An average of 58,000 (Range: 40,000–76,000), representing approx. 1.7% of the population (Council of Europe, 2012).
- **Economic Context:** The economy of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is marked by a complex and fragmented political and administrative framework, structured into two entities-the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska-as well as the Brčko District, an autonomous territory administered by both entities under the Dayton Agreement. This decentralized institutional system complicates the adoption of unified economic and educational policies at the national level, including in the fields of education and employment. One of the most persistent socio-economic problems in BiH is high youth unemployment. Recent data shows that the unemployment rate among people aged 15 to 24 stands at over 30%, which is one of the highest in Europe, well above EU averages.

This situation is closely linked to a series of structural labor market deficiencies, including skills mismatched with the economy's requirements, limited access to quality jobs, and a difficult school-to-work transition, which encourages youth migration and the "brain drain" phenomenon, whereby a significant proportion of the educated workforce leaves the country for opportunities abroad.

In this context, the Vocational Education and Training (VET) system is considered a critical element for improving the prospects of young people in the labor market. Reforms and investments in VET to make training more relevant to employer demands and the current market are frequently identified in policy documents as part of the solutions needed to reduce structural unemployment and mitigate the outflow of the workforce.

5.4.2 Structure of the VET System

Governance: The system is extremely decentralized, with 12 different government education units (one for each of the 10 cantons of the Federation, one for Republika Srpska, and one for Brčko), which complicates unified reforms.

VET Offer: Secondary education in BiH is dominated by technical and vocational schools:

- **Enrollment:** Approximately 72-75% of high school students are enrolled in VET programs, a traditionally high rate (European Training Foundation, 2023).

➤ **Structure:**

- 3-year VET: Trades (Level III), market-oriented.
- 4-year VET: Technical schools (Level IV), which allow for further studies.

Dual Education System: Although there is no unified dual system at the national level, recent reforms have introduced dual elements:

- **Republika Srpska:** Adopted a Law on Dual Education, formalizing payment to students by employers.
- **Federation of BiH (Sarajevo Canton):** Introduced regulations to increase company internships with the support of German (GIZ) and Swiss projects.

5.4.3 Roma Population and Socio-economic Status

Roma represent the largest, but also the most disadvantaged and vulnerable national minority in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), facing severe multidimensional exclusion (European Commission, 2023).

Socio-economic indicators:

- **Poverty:** Poverty disproportionately affects the Roma minority. According to data, Roma children are 3 times more likely to live in poverty compared to other children (UNICEF, 2020). Roma households also face acute problems related to food insecurity and hunger, with the gap between them and non-Roma neighbors being particularly wide in BiH (World Bank, 2019).
- **NEET Rate:** According to the World Bank, 82% of young Roma (15-24 years old) in BiH are not in employment, education, or training (NEET), the highest rate in the region. Among young Roma women, the NEET rate reaches an alarming level of 82%-86% (World Bank, 2019).

Housing and infrastructure:

- **Water and sanitation:** Severe material deprivation is reflected in housing quality. Only 87% of Roma households in BiH have access to running water inside the home (compared to 96% for neighboring non-Roma) (World Bank, 2019).

- Many Roma households still live in informal settlements lacking adequate access to water and electricity, and the process of legalizing these settlements progresses unevenly (European Commission, 2023).

5.4.4 National Strategy for Roma Integration

Bosnia and Herzegovina has adopted a national Action Plan for the social inclusion of Roma men and women (2021-2025).

Implementation and budget: Although the strategy exists, financial support has decreased. For the implementation of the plan, the state allocated a budget of 700,000 EUR for 2023, representing a decrease from 2020 (when 1 million EUR was allocated). Monitoring of this plan is carried out by a Roma Advisory Committee; however, its implementation requires adequate funding from all levels of government to reverse the trend of decreasing funds (European Commission, 2023).

5.4.5 VET Policies and Roma Inclusion

- **Textbooks and transport:** Basic education suffers from underfunding. In most primary and secondary schools (including VET), children from low-income families, including Roma, do not benefit from free textbooks or subsidized transport, which compromises their right to education (UNICEF, 2020).
- **Vocational education and the labor market:** A large portion of unemployed Roma are not eligible for Active Labor Market Programs (ALMP) aimed at vocational training (VET) because they have not completed compulsory education. This requirement de facto excludes many young Roma from acquiring qualifications demanded by the labor market (World Bank, 2019).
- **Mediators:** To support school participation at all levels of education (including VET) and reduce dropout rates, it is recommended to expand and institutionalize programs for Roma school mediators, who can combat segregation and improve teacher attitudes (World Bank, 2019).

5.4.6 Documented Interventions and Results

Problems related to the exclusion of Roma children in education and vocational training are aggravated by stigmatization. Roma parents often hesitate to send their children to school due to discrimination and the stigma they face from society and, sometimes, from the institutional system. Although schools are not officially segregated, there is no teaching in the Romani language, and the level of awareness of Roma culture among the rest of the population is extremely limited (European Commission, 2023; UNICEF, 2020).

As a regional best practice, initiatives funded by the Roma Education Fund offer a viable model for BiH, focusing on providing scholarships, tutoring, and mentoring for Roma students in secondary and vocational schools, which directly results in preventing school dropout and facilitating the transition to the labor market (World Bank, 2019).

5.4.7 Statistical Data (Roma vs. General Population)

Educational gaps in Bosnia and Herzegovina are profound, illustrating a crisis in the transition of young Roma to high schools and vocational education.

➤ **Secondary education attendance rate (High School/VET):**

- General population: 84.6% (UNICEF, 2020).
- Roma population: Only 23% of Roma children attend secondary education. The gender disparity is visible, with only 18% of Roma girls enrolled at this educational level (UNICEF, 2020).

➤ **Upper secondary completion (Youth 22-25 years):**

- Roma population: Only 21% of young Roma in BiH manage to complete upper secondary education (high school/VET) (World Bank, 2019).
- Non-Roma (neighboring areas): 86% complete the same educational level (World Bank, 2019).

➤ **School dropout:** The dropout rate remains extremely high among the Roma minority throughout the entire educational cycle (European Commission, 2023).

5.4.8 Key Challenges and Opportunities

Challenges:

1. **Administrative fragmentation:** The lack of a single policy means that a Roma student in Sarajevo Canton has completely different opportunities compared to one in a rural area of Republika Srpska.
2. **Extreme child poverty:** The fact that 68% of Roma children suffer from severe material deprivation (clothes, footwear, nutrition) leads to school dropout before reaching VET.
3. **Discrimination:** "De facto" segregation in certain schools and the attitude of employers toward Roma graduates.

Opportunities:

1. **Dual Reform:** The introduction of dual education (especially in sectors such as wood processing and metallurgy) offers the opportunity to employ young Roma directly through internships, bypassing prejudices from classical interviews.
2. **IPA III Funds:** New pre-accession instruments emphasize the "Green Agenda" and social inclusion, offering resources for targeted VET programs.

5.5 KOSOVO

5.5.1 National Context

Basic indicators:

- **Population:** 1.73 - 1.77 million inhabitants (KAS, 2011). Preliminary data from the new 2024 census are being processed.
- **GDP per capita:** Approximately 7,023 USD, representing one of the lowest values in Europe (World Bank, 2024).

- **EU Status:** Officially applied for EU membership in December 2022. Visa liberalization for Kosovar citizens came into effect on January 1, 2024 (European Commission, 2023).
- **Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian (RAE) population:**
 - In Kosovo, these three groups are distinctly recognized in the Constitution but share similar socio-economic and exclusion challenges.
 - 2011 Census: 35,784 people (8,824 Roma, 15,436 Ashkali, 11,524 Egyptians), representing approx. 2% of the population (KAS, 2011).
 - Estimated (Council of Europe): Between 25,000 and 50,000 people (with the average estimated at approx. 37,500) (Council of Europe, 2012).
- **Economic Context:**

Kosovo has the youngest population in Europe but faces a rigid labor market. According to the Labor Force Survey, the general unemployment rate is 12.6%, but youth unemployment (15-24 years) remains high at 21.4%, with a slight decline observed in 2024 (Kosovo Agency of Statistics, 2023). The economy depends significantly on diaspora remittances. Reforming the Vocational Education and Training (VET) system is considered essential to reduce skills mismatches in the labor market (European Commission, 2023).

5.5.2 Structure of the VET System

Governance:

- **Ministry of Education, Science, Technology, and Innovation (MESTI):** Formulates national policies and funds the education system.
- **National Qualifications Authority (NQA):** Ensures quality control, occupational standards, and accreditation.
- **Employment Agency of the Republic of Kosovo (EARK):** Manages Vocational Training Centers (VTCs) for adults and the unemployed.

VET Offer: The VET system is a major educational path in Kosovo, attracting half of the students who complete compulsory education (9th grade):

- **Enrollment:** Over 50% of upper secondary education students attend vocational schools (European Commission, 2023).

- **Dual System:** Although there is no unified dual education law fully implemented nationwide, MESTI has been piloting dual education programs since 2022 (e.g., profiles for hairdressing, masonry, cooking, hospitality assistance) in collaboration with international donors, where students spend a large portion of time practicing in companies (MESTI, 2022). In the 2023/2024 school year, the program expanded massively to 12 profiles (adding auto mechanics, plumbing, electrical work, tailoring, carpentry, aesthetics, retail, and metalworking) in 21 schools across 14 municipalities.

5.5.3 Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian (RAE) Communities and Socio-economic Status

RAE communities face some of the most severe exclusion rates in the region. The Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) dedicated to RAE communities in Kosovo shows major gaps.

Socio-economic indicators (MICS 6 RAE Sample data):

- **Standard of living:** An overwhelming proportion of RAE children live in the poorest wealth quintiles compared to the general population, reflecting severe material deprivation (KAS & UNICEF, 2020).
- **NEET Rate:** MICS data show that 73% of young RAE (15-24 years old) are not in employment, education, or training (NEET). Among young women in these communities, the NEET rate rises to 86% (KAS & UNICEF, 2020).
- **Child labor:** 7% of RAE children (5-17 years old) are involved in child labor (including hazardous economic activities), a factor that directly hinders regular attendance at school and VET programs (KAS & UNICEF, 2020).

Housing and "Digital Divide":

- Although access to the water network is high (over 90%), home study conditions are precarious.
- Only 46% of RAE children have a quiet place to study at home, and under 15% have access to a computer (or tablet) and a stable internet connection, which creates a major handicap for modern education and digital skills development (KAS & UNICEF, 2020).

5.5.4 National Strategy

Kosovo is implementing the Strategy for the Advancement of the Rights of Roma and Ashkali Communities 2022-2026 (Government of Kosovo, 2022). (Members of the Egyptian community are often included in parallel strategies or similar government inclusion programs).

Strategic Priorities:

1. **Education:** Preventing school dropout and granting scholarships to facilitate the transition to upper secondary education (including VET).
2. **Employment:** Increasing access to active labor market measures through the Employment Agency.
3. **Housing:** Improving living conditions and resolving issues related to property deeds.
Implementation: The government has created an inter-institutional coordination team, but the European Commission warns that the budget allocated for the strategy's implementation is limited and often under-executed (European Commission, 2023).

5.5.5 VET Policies and Inclusion of Communities

- **MESTI Scholarships:** Every year, the Ministry of Education awards a package of 500-600 scholarships (worth approximately 300 EUR per school year) specifically for RAE community students enrolled in upper secondary education (high schools and vocational schools) to cover the hidden costs of education (MESTI, 2022).
- **Learning Centers:** Regulated by MESTI Administrative Instruction No. 19/2018, these community centers (supported by the state and NGOs) represent the most effective local intervention. They offer homework support and remedial activities, preventing school dropout before students reach VET age.
- **Affirmative Quotas:** There are quotas and preferential scoring for the admission of candidates from minority communities into public post-secondary and university institutions.

5.5.6 Documented Interventions and Results

VoRAE (Voice of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians) programs:

Through its employment programs, VoRAE collaborates with VET centers and private employers to offer paid internships and on-the-job training for young RAE. Initiatives have shown that youth who benefit from technical training and mentoring can achieve significantly higher employment rates in the months immediately following graduation, exceeding community averages regarding the transition to the formal sector (VoRAE, 2022).

5.5.7 Statistical Data (RAE vs. General Population)

The educational gap is critical at the upper secondary level (the specific age for vocational/high school training), where systemic dropout is recorded. According to MICS 6 comparative data (KAS & UNICEF, 2020):

➤ **Net high school/vocational school attendance rate:**

- General population: 86.8%
- RAE Communities: 35.8% (A massive 51 percentage point gap).

➤ **Upper secondary education completion (20-24 age group):**

- General population: 87%
- RAE Communities: 24% (This indicates that only 1 in 5 young RAE achieves a secondary/VET level qualification).

5.5.8 Challenges and Opportunities

Challenges:

1. **Discrimination and dropout:** Latent segregation, lack of adequate teaching resources, and discriminatory attitudes are "push factors" that cause RAE children to leave school at the end of middle school.

2. **Associated costs:** Although public education is free, costs for transport, clothing, practice equipment for VET workshops, and textbooks are major barriers.
3. **Early marriages:** According to 2019–2020 MICS data for Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities in Kosovo, 7.3% of women aged 20–24 married before age 15, and 30.9% before age 18, indicating a high prevalence of early marriage among young cohorts.

Opportunities:

1. **Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL):** The National Qualifications Authority and EARK are expanding their Prior Learning Validation schemes. This is a major opportunity for RAE adults who have learned trades informally (e.g., construction, mechanics) to obtain an official VET certificate, increasing their employment prospects.
2. **Non-formal IT Education:** Kosovo's IT sector (including outsourcing) is expanding. Short training programs, if subsidized for RAE groups, can provide a fast track to a market-demanded qualification, bypassing the barriers of the traditional education system.

5.6 MONTENEGRO

5.6.1 National Context

Basic indicators:

- **Population:** Approximately 633,158 inhabitants (MONSTAT, 2024).
- **GDP per capita:** 13,263 USD (World Bank, 2024).
- **EU Status:** Candidate country since 2010. It is the leader in the negotiation process in the region, having all negotiation chapters opened (European Commission, 2023).
- **Roma and Egyptian (RE) population:**
 - In Montenegro, Roma and (Balkan) Egyptian communities are addressed together in public policy documents, sharing similar vulnerabilities.

- 2011 Census: 6,251 Roma and 2,054 Egyptians, totaling approximately 1.3% of the total population.
- Estimated (Council of Europe): Between 15,000 and 25,000 people (with the average estimated at 20,000), representing up to 3.2% of the population (World Bank, 2019).

➤ **Economic Context:**

Montenegro's economy is small, open, and heavily dependent on tourism and services. The seasonality of the economy creates large fluctuations in labor demand. In this context, the VET sector is essential for providing qualified personnel in tourism, construction, and services-sectors where Roma labor often operates informally.

5.6.2 Structure of the VET System

Governance:

- **Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation:** Sets national policy and coordinates funding.
- **Center for Vocational Education (CSO):** Responsible for developing VET curricula, occupational standards, and teacher training.

VET Offer: Vocational education is strongly anchored in the Montenegrin educational system, with the majority of students opting for this route after middle school:

- **Enrollment:** Approximately 66.8% of upper secondary education students are enrolled in vocational schools (VET) (European Training Foundation, 2022). According to MONSTAT (2025), at the end of the 2023/2024 school year, 67.9% of secondary education graduates completed vocational schools (VET), while only 32.1% followed the theoretical profile (gymnasium/high school).
- **Dual Education System:** Montenegro reintroduced the dual system in the 2017/2018 school year. In 2022/2023, over 800 students and 250 employers were involved in this system. The model is incentive-based: students receive a monthly allowance that

increases progressively (between 10% and 20% of the average wage), with costs shared between the state in the first two years and the employer in the third year (Ministry of Education of Montenegro, 2023).

Due to the "Europe Now 2" economic program, the average net wage in Montenegro increased to approximately 1,000 EUR (January 2025), which led to an automatic increase in student allowances (approx. 100 EUR in Year I, 200 EUR in Year III).

5.6.3 Roma Population and Socio-economic Status

The Roma and Egyptian community is the most marginalized in the country. A significant proportion consists of internally displaced persons from Kosovo during the 1999 conflict, many of whom still face an unregulated legal status.

Socio-economic indicators:

- **Poverty and food insecurity:** Material poverty is acute. According to data, only 34% of Roma households are food secure, with the remaining 66% facing a lack of access to basic food (World Bank, 2019).
- **NEET Rate:** The rate of young Roma and Egyptians (15-24 years old) who are neither employed, nor in education or training is alarming: 78%, compared to only 41% for non-Roma in the same area (World Bank, 2019) and approximately 20% at the national level. Primary school enrollment: 91% for Roma children, but in secondary and VET education, it is 27% (Education for Every Child | UNICEF Montenegro, 2025).
- **Secondary Education (High School/VET):** Only 27% of RE youth enroll.
- **Informal labor:** 58% of working Roma are employed in the informal economy, without contracts or social insurance (World Bank, 2019).

Housing, documents, and infrastructure:

- **Overcrowding:** Housing conditions are extremely precarious; 78% of the Roma population in Montenegro lives in overcrowded housing, which severely affects young people's ability to study (World Bank, 2019).

- **Lack of Documents:** Unlike other states in the region, Montenegro has a specific problem: only 83% of Roma over 16 years old hold a valid ID card. This drastically limits their right to access health insurance, VET programs, and employment services (World Bank, 2019).

5.6.4 National Strategy for Roma Integration

Montenegro is implementing the Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma and Egyptians 2021-2025, coordinated by the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights (Ministry of Human and Minority Rights, 2021). In October 2025, Montenegro began preparing the new Strategy for the Inclusion of Roma and Egyptians (2026–2030). A new regional quantitative survey is planned to update these figures (NEET, poverty, housing) by the end of 2025 (Building the Future of Inclusion, 2025).

Strategic Priorities:

1. **Education:** Increasing high school and VET enrollment and completion rates.
2. **Legal Status:** Resolving issues for persons without ID cards and preventing statelessness (a major risk for migrants from Kosovo).
3. **Housing:** Legalizing informal settlements and continuing social housing programs.
Implementation: The European Commission (2023) notes that although there is a budget of approximately 700,000 EUR allocated for 2023, efforts to employ Roma remain ineffective due to the huge unemployment rate and lack of inter-institutional coordination.

5.6.5 VET Policies and Roma Inclusion

- **Affirmative Action in enrollment:** Legislation allows for the enrollment of Roma students in secondary schools (including VET) through affirmative action measures (guaranteed quotas and reduced admission scores), even if they have educational gaps from primary school (Ministry of Human and Minority Rights, 2021).
- **Mediators for RE social inclusion:** Montenegro has made progress by institutionalizing the position of school mediator. Currently, they work directly in schools with a high

density of RE students, facilitating communication between families and teachers and monitoring absenteeism.

- **Scholarships and mentoring:** The Ministry of Education offers monthly scholarships (approx. 60 EUR) for Roma students in high schools and VET schools, conditioned on attendance. Additionally, a program is financed where teachers become mentors for young Roma to support them in catching up with school material (Ministry of Human and Minority Rights, 2021).

Despite these measures, their efficiency is limited by persistent logistical barriers, particularly the lack of organized school transport to VET units; the 2024 European Commission report emphasizes that distance from informal settlements remains a major dropout factor during the transition to secondary education (European Commission, 2024).

5.6.6 Documented Interventions and Results

HELP Program (Hilfe zur Selbsthilfe): This German NGO implements on-the-job training programs for young Roma in Montenegro. Youth are placed directly with private employers in services and tourism, and their salaries are subsidized for 6 months—an intervention that has led to good employee retention rates after funding ends. In a pilot project in Podgorica, the employment rate after completion of the internship was approximately 39% (13 out of 33 interns obtained permanent contracts), significantly exceeding initial 10% targets. Youth receive a monthly subsidy (e.g., 250 EUR in the 2021-2022 projects) to cover living costs during training. HELP continues these interventions, placing increased emphasis on the northern region of the country (Berane, Bijelo Polje), where vulnerability is higher (HELP Montenegro, 2024).

ROMACTED (Council of Europe): At the level of local authorities such as Podgorica, Nikšić, Bar, and Ulcinj, the second phase of the program (2021-2024) facilitates youth access to short vocational training courses and community participation, aiming to empower them in their relationship with state institutions. In 2023-2024, ROMACTED financed short qualification courses and equipped "smart classrooms" and multifunctional centers to facilitate youth access to educational resources (Council of Europe, 2024).

5.6.7 Statistical Data

Montenegro records the most dramatic decline in school participation during the transition to secondary education (high school/VET) in the entire Western Balkans region.

Education Level (Roma vs. Non-Roma) - World Bank / RRS 2017 (World Bank, 2019):

➤ **Upper Secondary Completion (22-25 age group):**

- Non-Roma population (neighborhood): 88%
- Roma population: 3% (This massive gap of 85 percentage points illustrates a near-total failure in retaining Roma students in secondary schools and VET).

➤ **Participation in compulsory education (18-21 years):**

- Only 34% of young Roma complete at least compulsory middle school, severely limiting any chance of entering the VET system (World Bank, 2019).

5.6.8 Challenges and Opportunities

Challenges:

1. **Lack of Identity Documents:** Over 17% of adult Roma do not have identity documents, which makes it impossible for them to be formally employed and enrolled in the official vocational training programs of the Employment Agency (World Bank, 2019).
2. **Seasonal Work and Dropout:** Many young Roma resort to seasonal work or collecting recyclable materials for survival. The lack of alignment between school programs and their need for immediate income leads to dropout. The ETF report (2024) underlines that the 4-year VET educational model is too long for youth living in food insecurity (66%).
3. **Language Barriers:** For a portion of the RE community (displaced from Kosovo), the mother tongue is Albanian or Romani. Deficiencies in mastering the official language hinder participation in theoretical courses in VET schools.

Opportunities:

1. **Subsidized Dual System:** If current state-offered scholarships for Roma are combined with the apprentice salary from the dual system, Roma youth could have a sufficient financial incentive to remain in school and learn a trade in tourism or construction.
2. **Tourism as an Integration Engine:** Montenegro faces a severe labor crisis in tourism. The acute search for personnel for the HORECA sector (hospitality) makes private employers more willing to participate in on-the-job training programs for vulnerable youth.

5.7 TÜRKİYE

5.7.1 National Context

Basic indicators:

- **Population:** 85.3 million (TurkStat, 2023). Estimates for 2025-2026 indicate surpassing the 86 million threshold.
- **GDP per capita:** 15,892 USD (World Bank, 2024).
- **EU Status:** Candidate country since 1999. Accession negotiations have been effectively frozen since 2018, although cooperation in essential areas (migration, trade) continues (European Commission, 2023).
- **Roma Population:**
 - Official: There is no data, as Türkiye does not collect statistics on ethnic grounds.
 - Estimated (Council of Europe): An average of 2.75 million, but local organizations (e.g., Zero Discrimination Association) estimate between 4 and 6 million, considering the process of assimilation, representing the largest Roma population in the region and one of the largest in the world (Council of Europe, 2012).
- **Economic Context:** Türkiye is a major economy with a strong industrial base, but it faces high inflation and economic volatility. Youth unemployment (15-24 years) is

approximately 16.6% (TurkStat, 2024). There is a massive demand for technical labor in industrial zones (Istanbul, Kocaeli, Bursa), which has prompted the government to heavily prioritize Vocational Education and Training (VET).

5.7.2 Structure of the VET System

Governance: The system is highly centralized, managed by the Ministry of National Education (MEB) through the General Directorate for Vocational and Technical Education.

VET Offer: The Turkish VET system is massive and well-integrated with industry:

- **Enrollment:** Approximately 35-40% of high school students are enrolled in the vocational track. According to the 2023 MEB report, approximately 38% of high school students are in the VET track. The government's goal is to reach 50%.

- **Structure:**
 - Anatolian Technical and Vocational High Schools (MTAL): 4-year duration, offering a technician diploma and the possibility of university access.

 - Vocational Training Centers (MESEM): The equivalent of an apprenticeship school, recently reformed to become the main pillar of the dual system.

- **Dual Education System (MESEM):** Türkiye radically reformed its apprenticeship system (MESEM) in 2016 and 2021, transforming it into an attractive dual system:
 - **Model:** Students attend school 1 day a week and work in a company 4 days a week.

 - **Wages:** The state subsidizes student wages (30% of the minimum wage in the first years, 50% in the final year). This financial aspect makes the system very attractive to low-income families, including Roma families.

 - **Scale:** The number of apprentices increased from 160,000 to over 1.2 million in just one year (2022) following government campaigns (MEB, 2023). In 2024, the number stabilized around 1.4 million; Türkiye now has one of the largest apprenticeship systems in the world by volume.



5.7.3 Roma Population and Socio-economic Status

Roma in Türkiye are concentrated in urban areas (e.g., Istanbul, Izmir, Edirne). Displacement from historical neighborhoods (Sulukule, Kuştepe in Istanbul) is documented as the primary cause of the loss of community support networks. Families are moved into TOKİ (social housing) complexes on the periphery, where transport costs to informal jobs become prohibitive (Minority Rights Group International, 2024).

Socio-economic indicators (Sources: European Commission 2023, MRG 2022):

- **Poverty:** Although there is no official percentage figure, reports indicate that over 80-90% of Roma work in the informal sector (waste collection, music, street vending), being excluded from social security (European Commission - Türkiye 2023).
- **NEET Rate:** Although the national NEET average is approximately 21%, in majority-Roma neighborhoods, it exceeds 60-70%. Early marriage and traditional gender roles remain major structural barriers to continuing education (VET).
- **Housing:** Displacement from historical neighborhoods has pushed many families to the periphery, far from economic opportunities and quality schools.

5.7.4 National Strategy for Roma Integration

Türkiye has adopted a new *National Strategy for Roma Citizens (2023-2030)* and an accompanying Action Plan (Resmî Gazete, 2023).

Priorities:

1. **Education:** Reducing absenteeism and early school leaving.
2. **Employment:** Increasing employability through VET courses and certification of informal skills (e.g., for waste collectors).
3. **Housing and health.**

Implementation: The Ministry of Family and Social Services coordinates the strategy. The European Commission (2023) notes that while there is political will, the strategy lacks a specific dedicated budget and clear, quantifiable monitoring indicators.

5.7.5 VET Policies and Roma Inclusion

- **Conditional Cash Transfer for Education (CCT):** This is the most important social policy. Poor families (mostly Roma in certain areas) receive monthly payments if children attend school regularly. Amounts are higher for girls to encourage their schooling.
- **MESEM Centers as an inclusion tool:** Because students receive a monthly salary (approx. 100-150 EUR) from their first month of school, Vocational Training Centers have become the main option for Roma boys, reducing school dropout but risking locking them into low-skilled labor (MEB, 2023).
- **SIROMA Project:** Employed social mediators and counselors in schools, although their sustainability after the end of EU funding was problematic.

5.7.6 Documented Interventions and Results

ROMSID Project (EU/IPA II funded): Run under the Ministry of Family, it targeted 12 provinces with a high density of Roma. It focused on short vocational training (2-4 month courses).

Waste collector certification (Zero Waste): The Ministry of Environment started a process to formalize waste collectors (a profession predominantly practiced by Roma). By recognizing this work and offering VET training for occupational safety, the government is attempting to integrate them into the formal economy.

5.7.7 Statistical Data

Due to the lack of ethnic data, proxy studies are used.

Education Level (Estimates):

- **Completion of Compulsory Education (4+4+4):**
 - General Population: The net high school enrollment rate is 89.7% (MEB, 2023).
 - Roma Population: Local studies (e.g., in the Marmara or Aegean regions) indicate school dropout rates of 60-80% after finishing middle school (8th grade), with the transition to high school/VET being the critical point (Tunca et al., 2022).

- **Children out of school:** Roma children represent a major percentage of out-of-school children in Türkiye.

5.7.8 Challenges and Opportunities

Challenges:

1. **Child labor:** The family's need for income pushes children to work illegally or enter the MESEM system (apprenticeship) not for education, but strictly for money, sacrificing theoretical training.
2. **Discrimination:** Persistent prejudice in hiring makes many Roma VET graduates hide their ethnic identity.
3. **Early marriages:** Seriously affects Roma girls, who drop out of the education system before they can access a professional qualification, remaining the primary cause of dropout.

Opportunities:

1. **Expansion of MESEM:** If properly monitored to prevent labor exploitation, the paid dual system is the most viable route to keep Roma youth in the educational system.
2. **Circular Economy:** Formalizing the recycling sector offers a unique chance to transform a traditional Roma occupation into a recognized and socially insured VET qualification.

CHAPTER 6: Empirical Analysis of Roma Youth Participation in Vocational Education and Training (VET) Programs

6.1 Introduction

This section presents the results of an in-depth qualitative analysis regarding the integration of Roma youth into VET systems and the labor market. To provide a comprehensive overview and avoid a unidirectional perspective, the research adopted a participatory methodology, triangulating data obtained from four essential categories of stakeholders: Roma youth (direct beneficiaries), non-governmental organizations (facilitators), VET institutions (education providers), and employers (final beneficiaries of the workforce). The analysis aims to explore not only general challenges but, more importantly, the differences in perception among these stakeholders, alongside the contextual particularities in the Western Balkan states and Türkiye.

6.2 Research Methodology

6.2.1 Research Design

The research utilized an exploratory qualitative design, based on a semi-structured questionnaire survey. The research instruments included open-ended questions, allowing respondents to describe their experiences, perceptions, and recommendations in their own words.

6.2.2 Participants

The final sample (N = 94) was composed of four distinct sub-samples collected from seven states (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Türkiye):

1. **Roma students and youth (N = 38):** Youth enrolled in or graduates of VET programs.
2. **Non-Governmental Organizations (N = 19):** Representatives of civil society with expertise in inclusive education and Roma integration.
3. **VET Institutions (N = 25):** Principals, teachers, pedagogues, and internship coordinators from technical high schools and vocational schools.
4. **Employers (N = 12):** Representatives of the private sector collaborating with VET schools.

6.3 Data Analysis

The textual data (collected in Albanian, Turkish, Serbian/Bosnian/Montenegrin, Macedonian, and English) were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The process involved familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, and constructing and reviewing themes. Special attention was paid to cross-sectional (between-group) and cross-state comparative analysis.

6.4 Results and Discussions: Comparative data analysis

1. Dynamics of access and information: Discrepancies in perception

Access to information regarding VET programs represents the first major point of divergence between stakeholders.

➤ School perspective vs. youth and NGO perspective:

The majority of educational institutions (in Serbia, Türkiye, Bosnia) claim to organize "open door days" and presentations in general schools. However, schools acknowledge that they generally lack a specific, culturally adapted strategy for attracting Roma youth. In sharp contrast, Roma youth very rarely report having learned about VET from school. Most mention NGOs (e.g., Roma Versitas in Kosovo and Albania, Romani Godi in Türkiye) or the informal environment (family, friends) as their primary source of information. NGOs confirm this reality, emphasizing that they use intensive outreach strategies: fieldwork in communities (door-to-door), social media campaigns, and alumni networks.

➤ **Differences between states:**

In Kosovo and Albania, programs such as WinForVET have created a structured ecosystem where the NGO acts as a highly effective information broker between youth, schools, and the labor market.

In Türkiye, NGOs highlight the necessity of home visits to counteract severe exclusion, and some associations focus on the digital literacy of youth to facilitate their access to information.

3. Conceptualizing barriers: who bears the responsibility?

One of the most relevant findings of the analysis is the different ways in which groups explain the obstacles in the educational path of Roma youth.

➤ **The School Perspective (Externalizing causes):** School representatives tend to place the causes of school dropout and low performance outside their area of control. The three most cited reasons by teachers and principals are: (1) lack of family involvement, (2) chronic absenteeism, and (3) early marriage (specifically mentioned in Serbia and Türkiye). A teacher from Serbia notes: "The biggest systemic barrier is their way of life, their community."

➤ **The NGO and Student Perspective (Structural and economic barriers):** NGOs and the youth offer a diametrically opposed narrative, pointing to deeply rooted structural and economic factors:

○ **Extreme poverty:** Students mention the impossibility of covering the hidden costs of education (transport from rural areas to the city, practical equipment, food). The need to work informally (day labor) to survive is a major reason for dropout, rather than a simple "lack of interest."

○ **Discrimination:** Organizations in Türkiye, Montenegro, and Serbia explicitly mention discrimination, segregation, and the prejudices of teachers and peers as factors that destroy the young people's self-esteem.

- **The Employer Perspective:** Employers focus on the final outcome: lack of practical experience and difficulty adapting to a rigid work schedule (discipline). They associate these issues with poor training provided by schools, not with ethnicity.
- **State-specific differences:**
 - **Kosovo:** A unique barrier emerges, specifically the language barrier. An NGO representative notes that a significant number of Roma attend school in Serbian but do not know the Albanian language, which completely blocks their access to the majority labor market.
 - **Türkiye:** Organizations in the Hatay region mention the devastating impact of earthquakes on the education of Dom and Abdal groups (Roma groups), who were forced to migrate, losing access to education. Discrimination in hiring based on physical appearance and home address (stigmatized neighborhoods) is also mentioned.
 - **Bosnia and Herzegovina / Serbia:** The main issue signaled is transport infrastructure (the difficulty for young people from villages/informal settlements to commute daily to urban VET schools).

3. Quality of VET education and transition to the labor market

The transition from school to work reveals a lack of synchronization between the educational system and the private sector.

- **Schools vs. Employers:** Schools report major difficulties in finding companies willing to accept Roma students for internships, citing "employer prejudice." On the other hand, employers complain that VET schools produce graduates who are focused on theory and lack "soft skills" (communication, teamwork, responsibility).
- **The Students' vision:** Roma youth are highly motivated by VET programs because they promise rapid employment. Their post-graduation experiences are mixed. Those who benefited from a long-term internship directly with an employer report success in obtaining a job. Those who only performed their internship in school workshops (often under-equipped) report unemployment.

- **Differences between states and reform proposals:** In North Macedonia, Albania, and Kosovo, all groups (NGOs, schools, students, employers) mention the urgent need to transition to a financially incentivized dual education system. Employers (e.g., from North Macedonia) declare that they would hire Roma youth if the state offered "job subsidies" or "tax exemptions." Students request "paid internships" so they do not have to choose between school and subsistence labor.

4. The effectiveness of support mechanisms

There is a broad consensus among stakeholders regarding what works, although implementation varies.

1. **School/community mediator:** All schools that reported low dropout rates mentioned the presence of a Roma pedagogical assistant or mediator. They are viewed as the only functional bridge of communication between vulnerable families and the school institution (North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia).
2. **Mentoring and after-school tutoring:** The NGO model, which provides youth with individualized support for homework and vocational counseling (e.g., programs supported by the Roma Education Fund), is considered by far the most effective method for increasing academic performance.
3. **Direct financial support:** Scholarships, while useful, are considered insufficient if they do not cover immediate logistical needs (transport, food, equipment).

6.5 Public policy recommendations

The synthesis of the comparative analysis underpins the following public policy recommendations, adapted to the needs of the VET ecosystem in the region:

1. **Adopting and subsidizing the Inclusive Dual VET system:** National governments must implement financial support schemes (subsidies, tax breaks) for companies that accept Roma youth into long-term apprenticeship programs. Student internships must be remunerated, thereby reducing the pressure of poverty that generates school dropout.

2. **Institutionalizing the system of mediators and pedagogical assistants:** The hiring of Roma school mediators must no longer depend on volatile NGO project funding. They must be permanently integrated into the organizational charts of VET schools that have a significant percentage of students from vulnerable backgrounds, being paid from the state budget.
3. **Reforming financial support packages:** Transforming standard scholarships into "guaranteed inclusion packages" that ensure full reimbursement of rural-urban transport, a hot meal at school, and the technical equipment necessary for practice.
4. **Local employment policies with affirmative action and linguistic support:** In specific contexts such as Kosovo, transition programs are needed that include intensive Albanian language courses for Roma graduates who studied in Serbian. At the same time, state institutions must become models of best practice by allocating specific quotas for Roma interns in local public administration.
5. **Mandatory training on inclusion and diversity:** Implementing training modules for teaching staff in the VET system and for internship tutors in companies, aimed at deconstructing prejudices and preventing discrimination in the workplace and at school.

6.6 Conclusions

The comparative analysis demonstrated that the lack of Roma youth participation in VET education and the labor market is not the result of disinterest, but of a combination of structural, economic, and systemic barriers. The major discrepancy between the approach of state institutions (which tend to externalize the problem to the family) and that of NGOs (which intervene directly and holistically) highlights a defect in current public policies. For real integration, it is imperative to create synergy between schools, employers, and civil society, mediated by public policies that prioritize paid dual education, direct social support, and active combatting of discrimination.

A set of questions was also sent to the ministries of education of each country. As of the completion of this study, only the Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation of Montenegro provided a complete response accompanied by statistical data.

The following section presents the official measures, policies, and results reported by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Innovation of Montenegro, formulated in response to the questionnaire addressed to government institutions regarding activities to increase the inclusion of Roma and Egyptian (RE) children in the educational system.

The integration of RE children is one of the Ministry's strategic objectives. It carries out a wide range of activities in collaboration with national and international partners to ensure the highest possible school enrollment rate. These activities are aligned with the Education Reform Strategy 2025–2035 and the Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma and Egyptians in Montenegro 2021–2025, with active participation already underway in the drafting of the future Strategy for the 2026–2030 period (including the 2026 Action Plan).

Systemic Support and Affirmative Action Measures

The Ministry's response highlights an integrated package of measures designed to eliminate financial and administrative barriers for RE students, applicable at all levels of education:

- **Preschool and Primary Education:** The Ministry ensures free attendance in preschool institutions for RE children. Campaigns are conducted to promote enrollment in kindergarten and primary schools, involving direct discussions with parents and the distribution of information materials in Montenegrin, Romani and Albanian. Furthermore, free transport is provided for primary school students in cities with a high concentration of RE children (Podgorica, Berane, Nikšić, Cetinje, Kotor, and Ulcinj).
- **Affirmative Action in School Transitions:** In Montenegro, the principle of affirmative action facilitates high school enrollment: candidates from the RE population receive 6 additional points upon admission to the first year of secondary school. Similar legislation guarantees free schooling at state and private faculties and dormitories allocate up to 7% of their housing capacity to students with disabilities, those from the RE population, and social assistance beneficiaries.

- **Scholarship System:** To prevent school dropout, the Ministry launches annual scholarship competitions. Starting with the 2024/2025 academic year, the scholarship amount for students was increased from 225 to 300 euros.

The Role of School Mediators and Staff Training

A central measure reported by the Ministry is the expansion of the social inclusion mediator network. The Ministry modified the regulatory framework, reducing the workload of a mediator from 70 to 35 assisted RE children, thereby doubling the intervention capacity. By the end of 2025, the system benefited from 35 school mediators (compared to 26 in 2023/2024). Their role is essential in identifying and enrolling children, maintaining school continuity, preventing dropout, and collaborating intensively with families. From 2021 to 2025, the Ministry organized continuous professional training sessions to obtain mediator qualifications, specifically encouraging candidates from the RE community itself (the most recent cohort having 11 graduates in April 2025).

Literacy Programs and International Recognition

According to the provided data, notable results have been achieved through specific programs funded by the Institute for Education, UNICEF and the EU, focusing on intensive literacy. Achievements include:

- Providing 280 hours of individual support in six primary schools, covering 148 students (Cycles I and II).
- Developing an "Illustrated Dictionary in RE languages - Montenegrin" and a "Guide for intensive literacy and strengthening social inclusion."
- Training teachers and principals on inclusive education and non-discrimination.

The Ministry's efforts have been recognized at the European level. In June, the institution received an award from the European Commission for exceptional achievements in promoting inclusion. Furthermore, within the framework of collaborations with the One Heart Children Foundation and the Roma Foundation for Europe, the Montenegrin integration model was validated as a best practice to be replicated in countries such as

Bulgaria and Albania. During debates organized with the support of the Council of Europe and the EU, the unanimous conclusion was that early education, adult programs, and micro-qualifications are the essential pillars for labor market integration.

Statistical Data on School Participation (2024–2026)

According to institutional reports, the following participation data for the RE population were recorded for the 2025/2026 school year:

- **Preschool education:** 362 preschoolers (202 boys and 160 girls).
- **Basic school (primary and middle school):** 1,748 students (884 boys and 864 girls).
- **Secondary school (high school/vocational):** 163 students (93 boys and 70 girls), of whom 116 are scholarship recipients.
- **University education:** 20 registered candidates (10 boys and 10 girls), of whom 18 students (10 boys and 8 girls) met the criteria for receiving the increased scholarship.

To provide a clear picture of school retention, the Ministry provided comparative data regarding enrollment and completion rates for the previous school year (2024/2025). An overall completion rate of 80% is observed in basic schools, with higher performance among girls (84%) compared to boys (77%). In the secondary cycle, the retention rate drops to 71%, reflecting the systemic challenges at the high school level.

Table 1. Situation of RE students in Basic School (Grades I-IX) – 2024/2025 School Year

Grade	Enrolled 2024/ 2025 Boys (M)	Enrolled 2024/2 025 Girls (F)	TOTAL ENROLLED	Completed 2024/2 025 Boys (M)	Completed 2024/2025 Girls (F)	TOTAL COMPLETED
1	88	79	167	84	75	159
2	99	98	197	90	95	185
3	83	107	190	72	95	167
4	114	91	205	105	85	190
5	122	104	226	97	91	188
6	134	122	256	75	84	159
7	115	106	221	63	71	134
8	70	89	159	43	68	111
9	64	75	139	58	64	122
Total	889	871	1760	687	728	1415
Completion rate (vs. enrolled				77%	84%	80%

Source: Response from the Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation of Montenegro, official data.

**Table 2. Situation of RE students in Secondary School (High School / Vocational, Years I-IV)
– 2024/2025 School Year**

Study Year	Enrolled 2024/2025 5 Boys (M)	Enrolled 2024/2025 5 Girls (F)	TOTAL ENROLLED	Completed 2024/2025 5 Boys (M)	Completed 2024/2025 5 Girls (F)	TOTAL COMPLETE
Year I	39	22	61	22	10	32
Year II	32	17	49	24	15	39
Year III	27	22	49	20	19	39
Year IV	6	12	18	4	12	16
Total	104	73	177	70	56	126
Completion rate (vs. enrolled)				67%	77%	71%

Source: Response from the Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation of Montenegro, official data.

(Methodological note: In the Montenegrin system, "Basic School" is compulsory and lasts 9 years, while "Secondary School" has a duration of 3 or 4 years).

CHAPTER 7: CROSS-CUTTING THEMATIC ANALYSIS

This chapter presents a thematic analysis cutting across all seven countries, examining key dimensions shaping Roma youth VET access and labor market integration. The analysis integrates documentary evidence, the latest statistical data (including 2024–2025 reports), and research findings to identify common patterns, variations, and underlying mechanisms.

7.1 Access to VET: Systemic Barriers

Roma youth face multiple intersecting barriers impeding VET access, operating at macro, meso, and micro levels.

7.1.1 Financial Barriers

Poverty as a Fundamental Constraint:

Extreme poverty represents the most consistently cited barrier across all studies and countries. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA, 2024) documented that an average of 70% of Roma live at risk of poverty, compared to approximately 16% of general populations, while an alarming 77% of Roma children live below the extreme poverty line. This creates multiple financial obstacles:

- **Direct Costs:** Even when tuition is free, families must cover transportation (€20-50 monthly), school materials (€50-150 annually) and appropriate clothing/uniforms. The World Bank (2019) calculated that total annual costs for secondary education range from €200-500, representing a prohibitive 15-30% of annual income for poor Roma households.
- **Opportunity Costs and Child Labor:** Foregone income from early employment represents significant family sacrifice. The International Labour Organization (ILO) and UNICEF (2024) highlighted that child labor remains a critical issue, with 40% of working children engaged in hazardous work. Roma children are disproportionately driven into informal economic activities to contribute to family survival.

- **Inadequacy of Scholarship Programs:** Scholarships typically offer €30-100 monthly-insufficient to cover both direct and opportunity costs. Furthermore, coverage is minimal (e.g., reaching only about 10% of eligible students in Serbia) and bureaucratic application procedures routinely exclude the most marginalized families.

7.1.2 Geographic Barriers

The Urban-Rural and Center-Periphery Divide

VET institutions are disproportionately concentrated in urban areas. The European Training Foundation (ETF, 2024, 2025) country reports document that the highest-quality VET programs, those featuring modern equipment, green and digital transitions, and employer partnerships are concentrated in capital cities. Roma youth residing in rural areas or informal, peripheral urban settlements often face 1-2 hour daily commutes, incurring prohibitive transportation costs and safety concerns, particularly for young women.

7.1.3 Academic Preparation Gaps

Weak Educational Foundation

Roma students entering VET typically have weaker academic preparation, largely driven by systemic failures early in life:

1. **Low Pre-Primary Participation:** FRA (2022) data explicitly shows that only 44% of Roma children attend early childhood education, compared to near-universal enrollment for the general population in many countries. This lack of early integration strongly predicts later academic struggles.
2. **Primary Education Challenges:** Roma children frequently attend lower-quality, segregated schools. Grade repetition rates are disproportionately high due to inadequate linguistic support for Romani speakers and deeply ingrained institutional discrimination.

Consequentially, many VET programs require completed primary education (8-9 grades) or entrance examinations. Tracking mechanisms systematically channel Roma students with weak academic records into the lowest-quality VET tracks (e.g., short-duration manual trades), excluding them from high-quality programs (Friedman et al., 2020).

7.1.4 Information and Awareness Gaps

Research consistently identifies that Roma families lack critical information regarding VET program prestige, dual education opportunities, and labor market prospects. This is caused by ineffective, school-based outreach that fails to engage early school leavers. Furthermore, the geographic isolation of Roma settlements and a severe lack of visible Roma role models in professional occupations compound these gaps, leading to sub-optimal career choices (Roma Education Fund, 2022)

7.1.5 Discriminatory Tracking and Selection

Systematic channeling operates throughout the education system. At the primary level, Roma children are often inappropriately placed in special education or lower ability tracks (Rostas & Kostka, 2014). Within VET systems, Roma students are concentrated in traditional, declining manual trades (construction, basic auto mechanics) and are virtually absent from emerging sectors like IT, healthcare technology, and renewable energy. Even in dual education, employers often exercise veto power, implicitly or explicitly rejecting Roma apprentices (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2019).

7.2 Quality and Relevance of VET Programs

7.2.1 Curriculum and Labor Market Alignment

ETF (2024, 2025) assessments identified a chronic curriculum-labor market misalignment. Many VET curricula are legacies of the 1990's planned economies. Roma students, disproportionately enrolled in these outdated tracks, miss exposure to the digital and green skills currently demanded by modernizing economies. Consequently, their skills often restrict them to the informal sector.

7.2.2 Equipment, Facilities, and Resources

VET programs where Roma students are concentrated frequently suffer from severe resource inadequacy. Outdated equipment from the 1980s-1990s and limited ICT infrastructure hamper digital skills development. Additionally, low salaries lead to a brain drain of qualified VET teachers, leaving practitioners who often lack formal pedagogical training in inclusive education.

7.2.3 Work-Based Learning Deficits

While work-based learning (WBL) is critical for employability, VET in the region remains predominantly school-based. According to ETF (2024), employer engagement is weak. For Roma students, this is disastrous: they face employer bias, lack social networks to secure internships, and cannot afford unpaid placements. They graduate without real-world references, crippling their transition to the labor market.

7.3 Discrimination and Stigmatization

Antigypsyism operates as a fundamental barrier. Brüggemann & D'Arcy (2017) documented overt harassment, institutional discrimination (lower teacher expectations), and spatial segregation. In the labor market, the statistical reality is stark: the Regional Roma Survey (UNDP/World Bank) found an astronomical NEET rate of 78.5% among Roma youth. Name-based and network-based hiring discrimination remains rampant, driven by employer stereotypes that perceive Roma as "unreliable" or "dishonest" (Milcher & Fischer, 2011). Despite formal anti-discrimination legal frameworks across all seven countries, implementation is weak, sanctions are minimal and the burden of proof deters victims from filing complaints.

7.4 Gender Dimensions

Roma girls and young women face compounded barriers requiring targeted interventions.

7.4.1 Gender-Specific Barriers to VET

The intersection of gender and ethnicity yields catastrophic economic outcomes. The UNDP/World Bank data revealed that the employment rate for Roma women in the Western Balkans is an abysmal 7.3%, compared to 16.5% for Roma men. FRA (2024) data corroborates that Roma women face a 31 percentage point employment gap compared to Roma men. Structural barriers include:

- **Early Marriage:** UNICEF (2023) and subsequent 2024–2025 research indicate that over 40% (and in some communities up to 50%) of Roma girls aged 13-19 are married or in informal unions. This decisively ends formal education.

- **Caregiving Responsibilities:** Traditional norms assign women primary responsibility for household labor, conflicting with inflexible VET schedules.
- **Mobility Restrictions:** Long-distance travel for VET is often viewed as inappropriate or unsafe for young women.

7.4.2 Successful Gender-Responsive Interventions

Double segregation concentrates Roma women in the lowest-paid occupations (e.g., basic textile, hospitality). However, targeted programs—such as the 2024 Tivat hospitality initiative in Montenegro, which yielded a 100% employment rate for Roma chambermaids—demonstrate that comprehensive support works. Success requires financial support (childcare subsidies), flexible program design, safe transportation and female Roma mentors.

7.5 Career Guidance and Transition Support

Career guidance typically operates within formal schooling, missing Roma youth who have already dropped out. Counselors frequently lack current labor market intelligence and may harbor biases that track Roma into low-prestige occupations. VET systems universally lack structured job placement mechanisms. The absence of placement support disproportionately harms Roma graduates, who lack the bridging social capital required to secure formal employment.

7.6 Role of Families and Communities

Over 40% of Roma adults have no formal education, and less than 10% completed secondary education (World Bank, 2019). This intergenerational deprivation limits parents' ability to navigate complex educational systems or advocate for their children. Effective interventions, such as Flecha & Soler's (2013) "Dialogic Learning," succeed by actively engaging families through community outreach, utilizing Roma mediators, and addressing immediate economic and safety concerns.

7.7 Employer Engagement and Labour Market Integration

Prejudice-based discrimination is compounded by objective barriers: Roma applicants often lack formal credentials and documented experience. Successful integration requires active employer engagement. Proven strategies include temporary wage subsidies, diversity commitments in public procurement, and intensive post-placement mentoring.

7.8 Governance, Coordination and Accountability

VET and Roma inclusion require coordination across Ministries of Education, Labor, and Social Affairs. However, the OECD (2024) and ETF (2024) document profound inter-ministerial fragmentation. Coordination councils often lack decision-making authority and budgets. Furthermore, a severe lack of ethnically disaggregated data—often justified by privacy laws—creates "statistical invisibility," making it impossible to evaluate program impact or enforce accountability.

7.9 Financing and Resource Adequacy

7.9.1 Budget Allocation and Donor Dependency

National education budgets allocate only 3-5% to VET, and virtually nothing (<0.1%) explicitly to Roma inclusion. Consequently, most interventions are heavily dependent on short-term international donor funding (EU IPA, bilateral donors), creating massive sustainability gaps when project cycles end.

7.9.2 Cost-Benefit and the Demographic Imperative

The failure to invest in Roma VET is an economic miscalculation. Roma are the fastest-growing demographic in the Western Balkans. According to the World Bank (2024), by 2035, between 14% and 29% of all new labor market entrants in Serbia will be Roma.

CHAPTER 8: BEST PRACTICES AND LESSONS LEARNED

This chapter identifies and analyzes documented best practices regarding the facilitation of Roma youth participation in vocational education and training (VET) and their integration into the labor market. Although regional results remain structurally unsystematic overall, certain specific interventions have demonstrated significant success. By analyzing these evidence-based models, this chapter provides an essential reference framework for their nationwide scaling and institutional adaptation in the Western Balkans and Türkiye.

8.1 Typology of best practices

Based on a comprehensive analysis of recent evaluations conducted between 2020 and 2024, successful practices in the region can be classified into several distinct typologies. The most impactful approach is the integrated support model, which builds on the premise that Roma youth face interconnected, mutually reinforcing barriers. Consequently, these models simultaneously address financial, academic, social, and psychological needs, providing individualized case management and maintaining sustained engagement from initial enrollment to labor market transition. Prominent examples in this regard include inclusive education programs funded by the Austrian Development Agency (ADA) and the Roma Education Fund (REF). Another critical typology focuses on dual education and work-based learning. These programs organically integrate practical, on-the-job training with theoretical instruction in the school environment. By establishing formalized partnerships with employers, which include non-discrimination clauses, and by providing financial support in the form of scholarships, these initiatives effectively bridge the gap between the education system and the labor market. The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) has played an essential role in pioneering these models in the region. Furthermore, successful systems frequently incorporate "Second Chance" programs and flexible pathways, offering

alternative entry points for early school leavers through modular scheduling and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) mechanisms.

Finally, interventions that prioritize community engagement and innovations in employer outreach have proven indispensable. Effective programs abandon passive institutional recruitment in favor of a proactive approach, led by Roma school mediators, who bridge the cultural distance between families and schools. Simultaneously, these programs utilize various strategies when collaborating with employers—such as wage subsidies, staff retention commitments, and workplace diversity training—to eliminate or reduce discriminatory hiring practices.

8.2 Documented best practices

This section presents a detailed analysis of specific, rigorously evaluated interventions that demonstrate quantifiable evidence of effectiveness in integrating Roma youth into the VET system and the labor market.

8.2.1 The REF WinForVET Project (2019–2022)

Implemented in Albania, Kosovo and Serbia by the Roma Education Fund (REF), with financial support from the Austrian Development Agency (ADA), the WinForVET project represents a paradigm of the integrated support model. The initiative aimed to increase the enrollment, graduation and quality employment rates of Roma youth by addressing systemic barriers in a holistic manner. Instead of providing isolated scholarships, the project implemented a multidimensional intervention. Financially, it offered full scholarships covering direct costs (teaching materials and transportation) alongside monthly allowances ranging from 50 to 80 euros to offset unforeseen costs. From an academic and psychosocial perspective, students benefited from targeted tutoring, participated in bridge programs to close educational gaps and received life-skills counseling. Furthermore, the project paired students with Roma professional role models for mentoring and facilitated direct placement into internships, simultaneously delivering anti-discrimination training modules for VET school teachers to foster a more inclusive institutional climate. The results of this holistic approach were unprecedented. According to the REF evaluation (2023), approximately 800

Roma youth enrolled across the three countries, achieving an 82% completion rate (400 long-term scholarship recipients; 150 youth in Kosovo receiving financial support/mentoring; 250 NEET youth received training, etc.). This figure contrasts sharply with the estimated baseline rate of 40-50% for marginalized Roma in standard VET programs. In addition, female participation reached 42%, directly challenging traditional gender segregation in technical fields. After graduation, 78% of the beneficiaries secured a job within twelve months, with 68% entering the formal sector with employment contracts. From an economic perspective, the intervention proved highly efficient. Operating at an average annual cost of 2,500 to 3,000 euros per student, the project generated an estimated return on investment (ROI) between 4.7:1 and 7.8:1. As corroborated by the World Bank (2024), transitioning a marginalized youth into formal employment prevents decades of welfare dependency and generates substantial, ongoing tax revenues, making the initial investment highly cost-effective. A recent 2025 report estimates that achieving parity in Roma employment could generate between 1.95 and 10 billion euros annually in the GDP of the region's countries (REF, 2025).

8.2.2 Swiss Cooperation's Dual VET Pilot Projects (Albania and North Macedonia)

The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) has fundamentally reshaped regional vocational education systems by supporting the systemic adaptation of the Swiss dual model. Flagship initiatives, such as the Skills for Jobs (S4J) project in Albania, implemented by Swisscontact and the Education for Employment (E4E) project in North Macedonia, have established robust frameworks that directly connect schools with employers. In this model, students spend three to four days a week in workplace apprenticeships and one to two days in vocational schools. The mechanism relies on tripartite agreements that guarantee employer-paid scholarships, professional mentoring, and rigorous quality assurance. To ensure that Roma youth are not excluded from these mainstream reforms, the projects integrated specific inclusion components. These included proactive community outreach campaigns, pre-apprenticeship academic preparation, and additional financial support designed to bridge the gap between employer-provided scholarships and the students' actual living costs. Evaluations conducted by Swisscontact in 2023 and 2024 indicate significant progress. While general graduate cohorts reached employment rates of over 80%, Roma participants—who accounted for approximately 8-10% of total students—achieved a 68% completion rate and an employment rate of about 60%. Although the Roma

employment rate remains slightly below the general average, it represents a massive improvement over the traditional outcomes of exclusively school-based VET systems. This persistent gap underscores deeply rooted structural challenges, particularly the hesitation of some employers to hire Roma candidates after their apprenticeship ends, as well as the severe lack of informal social capital networks among Roma youth.

8.2.3 Hospitality Inclusion Initiatives in Montenegro

In the coastal region of Montenegro, specifically in the Tivat municipality, a series of multi-stakeholder initiatives have successfully aligned the acute labor shortage in the tourism sector with the need for Roma economic inclusion. Coordinated by local authorities, Employment Offices, and Roma NGOs, the program targeted Roma women through an intensive, certified 12-week training course in hotel housekeeping, customer service and basic English for hospitality. The main differentiating factor of this program was the prior commitment made by employers; local hotels pledged to hire the participants upon successful certification, thereby eliminating the barrier of discrimination in post-training job searches.

The program provided extensive integrated support, including scholarships, organized transportation, childcare assistance, and on-the-job mentoring post-employment. The results were remarkable, with graduation and subsequent employment rates approaching 90%. Crucially, graduates entered the formal labor market earning competitive wages. Following the comprehensive economic reforms "Europe Now 1 and 2" implemented by Montenegro between 2022 and 2024, base salaries in the hospitality sector were structurally increased (with the minimum income ranging between 600 and 800 euros), ensuring that these jobs effectively lifted participating families out of extreme poverty. Furthermore, high employer satisfaction effectively dismantled negative stereotypes in the business community, leading to the organic replication of the model in neighboring coastal municipalities such as Budva and Bar.

8.2.4 Pedagogical Assistants in Serbia

Serbia provides a compelling example of institutionalizing community-level support by integrating "Pedagogical Assistants" (Pedagoški asistenti)-initially conceived as Roma educational assistants-directly into the national educational infrastructure. Instead of relying on precarious NGO funding based on temporary projects, these assistants are salaried directly by the Ministry of Education. Their role is multidimensional: they act as cultural mediators between Roma families and school staff, provide targeted academic support, and actively work to prevent early school leaving among marginalized students. According to data from the Serbian Ministry of Education and recent evaluations by UNICEF (2024), approximately 260-280 pedagogical assistants currently operate in the national school system. The impact of their presence is quantifiable and profound. Schools employing these assistants reported a 15-20% decrease in absenteeism and an 8-12 percentage point increase in the enrollment of Roma students in lower and upper secondary grades. By transforming this role into a systemic state intervention, Serbia has created a sustainable mechanism for inclusion. However, challenges persist; pedagogical assistants often face an inferior hierarchical status within staff rooms and current regulations restrict their allocation only to schools with a minimum threshold of 20 Roma students, leaving dispersed populations without adequate support.

8.3 Success Factors: Cross-cutting lessons

An analytical synthesis of these documented practices reveals a series of non-negotiable, cross-cutting elements that dictate the success or failure of VET interventions targeting Roma youth. First and foremost is the necessity of a comprehensive approach over fragmentation. Because Roma youth face a complex matrix of intersecting barriers, isolated interventions-such as providing a scholarship without supplementary academic tutoring or employer mediation-produce marginal results. Successful models invariably implement a holistic package of financial, academic, and psychosocial support. Moreover, success is contingent upon sustained, multi-year engagement. Short-term project cycles lasting six to twelve months are chronically insufficient to dismantle years of educational marginalization. Effective interventions require a continuous support structure, from the moment of initial enrollment through the critical first year of formal employment. Equally important is the early

establishment of formal partnerships with employers. Without a guaranteed commitment from the business sector, vocational training merely leads to the accumulation of diplomas, without viable employment pathways. Successful models secure company commitments before or during the training phase, thereby directly mitigating the hiring discrimination that graduates inevitably face.

Finally, cultural competence, Roma-led leadership and gender-responsive design represent critical components. Programs designed and led exclusively by non-Roma actors frequently fail to overcome the community's historical mistrust. The use of Roma mediators, coordinators and professional mentors ensures cultural responsiveness and helps dismantle internalized stigma. Additionally, programs must intentionally incorporate a gender-sensitive approach. To effectively include Roma women, interventions must systematically address gender-specific barriers by providing childcare support, ensuring safe transportation, and actively recruiting them into non-traditional, higher-paying occupational sectors.

8.4 Challenges in Scaling and Sustaining Best Practices

Despite the proven effectiveness of these targeted models, scaling pilot programs to a national level encounters profound structural obstacles. The primary challenge remains financial constraint coupled with donor dependency. Integrated support models, which cost approximately 2,500-3,000 euros per student annually, are frequently perceived by regional governments as prohibitively expensive compared to the standard per capita funding allocated to mainstream VET education. Consequently, the most impactful initiatives remain heavily dependent on international donors, such as EU IPA funds, the SDC, and the ADA. Scaling these models nationally requires a fundamental paradigm shift within Ministries of Finance, which must begin to view these costs not as burdensome expenditures, but as high-yield macroeconomic investments that prevent decades of welfare dependency and stimulate long-term economic growth (World Bank, 2024).

Institutional capacity and coordination deficits also hinder scalability. State VET institutions and public employment services often lack the specialized, intensive case management skills possessed by agile civil society organizations. Attempting to transfer these nuanced methodologies to rigid, underfunded state bureaucracies frequently dilutes their

effectiveness. Furthermore, the multidimensional nature of integrated support requires seamless inter-ministerial coordination across the domains of Education, Labor, and Social Welfare—a level of administrative synergy that remains notoriously weak throughout the Western Balkans.

Explicitly targeted and adequately funded programs for marginalized Roma communities often face political resistance or populist accusations of "positive discrimination" from the majority population. In response, governments frequently resort to the solution of mainstreaming, arguing that universal policies serve all citizens equally. However, as strongly emphasized by the European Commission (2023), general mainstreaming without specific, equity-targeted measures—a concept often referred to as Targeted Mainstreaming—practically guarantees that the most marginalized Roma youth will perpetually be left behind by the very systems that initially orchestrated their exclusion.

CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

9.1 Synthesis of key findings

Based on the systematic desk review and the synthesis of established specialized literature, this study formulates a series of critical conclusions:

9.1.1 Severity and persistence of exclusion

Roma youth continue to experience profound educational exclusion and severe marginalization in the labor market:

- Only 15% complete upper secondary education, compared to an average of 70-85% among the general population (a major gap of 55-70 percentage points). Over 60% of them fall into the NEET category (Not in Education, Employment, or Training).
- Employment rates stand below 30%, with a massive concentration in precarious jobs and the informal economy.
- 80% live at risk of poverty.

These major disparities have not significantly decreased despite two decades of policy interventions and considerable financial investments, signaling major deficiencies in current institutional approaches.

9.1.2 Confirmation of research hypotheses

The analysis confirmed all eight working hypotheses underpinning the study:

- **H1 - The implementation gap hypothesis:** There are major gaps between formal policy design and implementation, generated by insufficient funding, weak inter-ministerial coordination, limited institutional capacity and the lack of robust monitoring mechanisms.

- **H2 - Persistence of segregation:** Roma youth are channeled towards VET educational pathways considered unattractive.
- **H3 - Multi-dimensional barriers:** Roma face interconnected barriers operating simultaneously at the macro, meso, and micro levels; policies targeting a single level of intervention demonstrate limited effectiveness.
- **H4 - Gender differentiation:** Roma girls and young women face multiple and intersecting disadvantages, requiring tailored and gender-sensitive interventions.
- **H5 - Urban-rural disparities:** Rural Roma youth have much lower access to quality VET programs due to geographical distances and a limited supply of programs.
- **H6 - Employer discrimination:** Roma VET graduates encounter discriminatory barriers in hiring compared to non-Roma peers.
- **H7 - Cross-country variations:** States with a more advanced EU integration trajectory, a developed civil society, and explicit inclusion targets show better performance, although regional progress remains uneven.
- **H8 - Transferability of best practices:** Successful interventions share common elements (solid partnerships with employers, comprehensive support, sustained funding) but require fine-tuning to the national institutional context.

9.1.3 Critical barriers

- **Extreme poverty** is identified as the most persistent barrier, creating insurmountable financial obstacles. Even when education is formally free, hidden costs (transportation, school supplies) and opportunity costs (the need for immediate income through informal child labor) block participation.
- **Pervasive discrimination and antigypsyism** operate structurally across all stages of educational systems and the labor market, from teachers' low expectations and hostile school environments to employers' prejudices during interviews, drastically limiting integration even for qualified Roma youth.
- **Inadequate academic preparation**, caused by extremely low participation in early childhood education and school segregation in primary education, creates educational gaps that lead to high rates of early school leaving in the VET system.

- **Information asymmetries and a lack of social capital** isolate Roma families, who often lack clear information about quality VET programs and are deprived of the knowledge networks (social networks) necessary to access formal jobs.
- **Gender roles** raise specific structural barriers for young Roma women, being strongly correlated with early marriage practices, mobility restrictions, and unequal household responsibilities.

9.1.4 Elements of best practice and successful interventions

The analysis of documented interventions reveals that complex, well-funded, and sustained approaches can generate exceptional improvements in outcomes:

- **The WinForVET project:** Generated an employment rate of 78%, compared to an estimated baseline of 25-30% for Roma in standard VET pathways.
- **Dual VET pilot programs:** Recorded employment rates of approximately 65% for Roma youth, organically integrating work-based learning.
- **The hospitality sector initiative (Montenegro):** Achieved a very high employment rate among Roma women through dedicated direct partnerships with employers.

Fundamental elements of success include:

1. Comprehensive support services that simultaneously address multiple barriers.
2. Adequate financial allocation (costs of approximately €2,500 - €3,000 annually per student).
3. Sustained multi-year commitments.
4. Solid partnerships with employers that ensure the practical transition to work.
5. Cultural competence and leadership provided by Roma mediators/mentors.
6. Proactive involvement of families and the community.
7. Design adapted to the gender dimension and variable.
8. Quality impact monitoring and evaluation.

9.2 Policy Recommendations

Based on the synthesis of research evidence and the comparative analysis, this report provides strategic recommendations organized around eight priority areas:

PRIORITY AREA 1: Access and Enrollment in VET

Objective: Eliminate financial and structural barriers blocking Roma youth participation in VET programs.

- **Establishing comprehensive scholarship programs:** Financial packages must cover not only tuition fees but in full: practice materials, uniforms/equipment, transportation costs, and monthly allowances (minimum €100 - €120) designed to offset opportunity costs and subsistence. These programs must have clear coverage targets (up to 60% of eligible youth) and streamlined (debureaucratized) application procedures.
- **Implementing affirmative action measures:** Guaranteed reservation of places (quotas of 5-10%) in higher-quality VET programs for Roma students. Additionally, preparatory/transitional programs (6-12 months) are needed for youth who have dropped out of general education early.
- **Addressing geographical disparities:** Developing fully subsidized residential mechanisms (dormitories) or providing organized transportation to facilitate access for rural Roma youth to urban VET centers of excellence.

PRIORITY AREA 2: VET Quality and Labor Market Relevance

Objective: Ensure that VET systems deliver updated skills and facilitate quality formal employment.

- **Curriculum alignment:** Modernizing curricula through systematic and regular consultations with employers. Curricula must focus on emerging sectors (information technology, renewable energy, hospitality) and the integration of soft and digital skills.
- **Investments in equipment and human resources:** Urgent modernization of technological workshops and capacity building for teaching staff through continuous training modules, including inclusive pedagogy methods.

- **Expanding work-based learning components (Dual VET):** Implementing legal frameworks that mandate at least 20-30% of training time to be conducted directly within companies, in the form of paid apprenticeships and internships.

PRIORITY AREA 3: Anti-Discrimination and Inclusion

Objective: Create a discrimination-free institutional and work climate that guarantees the dignity of Roma youth.

- **Mandatory diversity training:** All teachers, VET administrators, and school counselors must complete training modules focused on deconstructing stereotypes and combating antigypsyism.
- **Clear institutional policies:** Adopting functional, transparent and confidential complaint mechanisms in all VET institutions, accompanied by real sanctions for staff or students displaying discriminatory behavior.
- **Conducting discrimination audits:** Periodic testing (via experimental methods) of school admission and employer selection practices. In case of clear evidence of discrimination, the burden of proof must be shifted to the respondent.

PRIORITY AREA 4: Career Guidance and Transition Support

Objective: Create the social and informational capital networks necessary for optimal professional insertion.

- **Specialized guidance services:** Implementing proactive counseling (outreach activities) directly within Roma communities, supported by cultural mediators. Materials must highlight successful role models of Roma professionals.
- **Comprehensive job placement services:** Establishing placement coordinators in schools to provide direct support: CV writing assistance, interview preparation, and facilitating direct contact with partner employers.
- **Post-graduation mentoring programs:** Maintaining counseling and support services for Roma graduates for 12-24 months post-employment, thereby increasing workforce retention rates.

PRIORITY AREA 5: Employer Engagement

Objective: Firmly engage the private sector in providing work-based training and formal contracts.

- **Financial incentives:** Introducing clear wage subsidy programs (covering 50-70% of the salary for 6-12 months), tax deductions, and awards for employers who recruit Roma VET graduates.
- **Developing employer networks:** Creating "Diversity Charters" and encouraging corporate social responsibility (CSR), promoting businesses engaged in diversity policies.
- **Workplace mentoring:** Providing training to existing company staff to combat unconscious bias and to act as dedicated mentors for young Roma apprentices/employees.

PRIORITY AREA 6: Gender Mainstreaming

Objective: Ensure equitable access for Roma girls and young women, overcoming the intersectionality of the barriers they face.

- **Gender-sensitive VET programs:** Designing flexible pathways, providing higher-value scholarships for girls, subsidizing childcare services and guaranteeing absolutely safe transportation routes.
- **Combating gender stereotypes:** Conducting awareness campaigns to attract young Roma women to technical and well-paid trades (IT, modern manufacturing), moving beyond traditional niches with precarious pay.
- **Strategies to combat early marriages:** Community dialogues aimed at increasing family involvement in supporting vocational training, presenting education as a clear economic alternative.

PRIORITY AREA 7: Governance, Coordination and Accountability

Objective: Strengthen institutional capacity and the policy monitoring ecosystem.

- **High-level inter-ministerial coordination:** Establishing permanent councils (Education, Labor, Social Protection) endowed with executive decision-making power and budgetary authority.

- **Authentic participation of Roma civil society:** Avoiding tokenism. Roma representatives and experts must hold essential roles in policy design, budgeting and direct monitoring of VET policies.
- **Data and monitoring:** Mandatory and systematic collection of educational and employment data disaggregated by ethnicity, protected by clear confidentiality regulations. Independent impact evaluation must become mandatory.

PRIORITY AREA 8: Financing and Sustainability

Objective: Ensure domestic budget lines and attract vital external funding for the continuity of reforms.

- **Transparent national budget allocations:** Establishing distinct budget lines within relevant Ministries explicitly earmarked for Roma inclusion, coupled with multi-year funding commitments (in 5-year cycles) to prevent projects from vanishing after NGO funding ends.
- **Maximizing EU funds (IPA / ESF+):** Increasing the technical capacity of local authorities to absorb European pre-accession funds and creating synergies between international donors to reduce policy fragmentation.
- **Innovative financing mechanisms:** Testing models such as social impact bonds or financial allocations directed exclusively based on actual employment outcomes.

9.3 Implementation Timeline: Short, Medium, and Long Term

To ensure the structured operationalization of the recommendations, actions are temporally prioritized as follows:

SHORT TERM (Years 1-2) - Immediate actions:

1. Revising National Roma Integration Strategies, incorporating explicit quantitative targets for VET participation.
2. Urgent establishment of comprehensive scholarship packages for Roma students already in the system.
3. Initiating mandatory training on diversity and combating antigypsyism for VET institution staff.

4. Launching the first discrimination audits in school admission and hiring processes.
5. Amending legislation to allow the collection of ethnically disaggregated statistics.
6. Immediate increase of at least 50% in national budgets directly allocated to Roma education.

MEDIUM TERM (Years 3-5) - Scaling and institutionalization:

1. Expanding the Dual VET model and employer internships to include a minimum of 30% of Roma VET students.
2. Integrating best practices into the state system: permanent employment of Roma school mediators, bridge programs, and functional placement services.
3. Achieving a female participation rate of 40% in VET pathways.
4. Establishing specialized career guidance services with outreach in all areas with a high Roma density.
5. Large-scale implementation of wage subsidy and tax deduction schemes for employers.
6. Achieving a minimum coverage of 30% with full scholarships for eligible Roma youth.

LONG TERM (Years 6-10) - Systemic transformation:

1. Reducing the educational gap by 50% (increasing the upper secondary VET graduation rate to 40-50% for Roma youth).
2. Reducing the labor market gap by 50% (achieving a formal employment rate of 45-50%).
3. Achieving full gender parity in VET participation.
4. Targeted Mainstreaming: Public VET systems become structurally inclusive, minimizing the need for external interventions through special projects.
5. Demonstrating wage convergence: Roma graduates of VET pathways achieve job quality and wages equivalent to their peers from the majority population.

9.4 Implementation Considerations

- **Political will and commitment (Leadership):** Successful implementation is contingent upon political will at the highest decision-making level. National policymakers (Prime Ministers, Ministers of Education and Labor) must directly commit to Roma inclusion, transitioning from statements of intent to financial allocations.
- **Inter-institutional partnerships (Multi-stakeholder):** No single actor has the capacity to solve this systemic crisis in isolation. Governments, business sector representatives, Roma civil society, and international institutions must collaborate through formal mechanisms.
- **Evidence-based adaptation:** Although the recommendations reflect regional best practices, they require calibration to the legislative, infrastructural, and demographic particularities of each country.
- **Avoiding common public policy pitfalls:**
 1. *Rhetoric without resources:* National strategies are useless without clear budget lines.
 2. *Short-term project logic:* Projects limited to 1-2 years cannot generate an institutional paradigm shift.
 3. *Tokenism:* Purely symbolic participation of Roma leaders, without granting them genuine executive and decision-making power.
 4. *The "One-Size-Fits-All" model:* Lack of nuanced approaches that differentiate the needs of urban, rural, and Roma women communities.
 5. *Mainstreaming without equity:* Generalist educational policies that do not include affirmative action measures tend to reproduce initial inequalities.
- **Sequencing (Prioritizing the order of interventions):** Transformation cannot be achieved simultaneously. The logical sequence is: (1) Foundation (data collection, coordination), (2) Access (financial subsidies and eliminating barriers), (3) Quality (curriculum, pedagogy), and (4) Integration (employers and transition).

9.5 Directions for Future Research

This desk review identifies several critical knowledge gaps that necessitate expanding the research:

1. **Longitudinal studies:** Initiating studies to track Roma VET graduates over a 5-10 year period to objectively evaluate employment stability, occupational trajectory, and income progression.
2. **Experimental evaluations:** Implementing Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) aimed at isolating the truly causal components of an educational intervention's success.
3. **Analysis of employer perspectives:** In-depth qualitative research focused on the corporate and business environment, understanding decision-making mechanisms in hiring and building counter-narratives to deconstruct stereotypes.
4. **Cost-Effectiveness Analyses:** Econometric models comparing the Return on Investment (ROI) for different types of VET programs dedicated to Roma, thereby arguing the macroeconomic value of workforce integration.
5. **In-depth intersectional analysis:** A detailed examination of the complex interaction between multiple identities (ethnicity, gender, disability, rural/informal residence) and the varying degrees of marginalization produced.
6. **Implementation Science:** In-depth study of bureaucratic barriers, explaining why national legislative frameworks perfectly aligned with EU standards frequently fail upon execution at the school or local administration level.
7. **Integrating the voices of Roma youth:** Prioritizing participatory research methodologies that shift the focus from a "deficit"-based approach to the agency of Roma youth, bringing their aspirations and lived experiences directly to the center of public policy design.

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