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## Colleges for Roma in Higher Education

**Abstract** This study presents initiatives aimed at promoting education among Roma youth. Today, special attention is given to post-secondary education. In this regard, I reviewed the object of the people's colleges ("népi kollégium") movement. In the 1930s and 1940s, a powerful movement successfully promoted education among the poor peasants, the marginalised social class in Hungary at that time. The history of similar efforts among the Roma population evokes this success.

**Keywords:** Roma, higher education, historical patterns, People Colleges

### **The problem**

The Roma community as an ethnic minority differs in many aspects from the other national minorities in Hungary. For instance, there are Roma communities in almost every European country, although the Roma represent a higher proportion of the total population in the former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The national minority populations in Hungary are not generally characterized by a standard of living (income, life expectancy, health, education etc.) that is materially different from that of the majority population. In contrast, the Roma population is significantly disadvantaged in all areas in relation to the majority population. A significant proportion of Roma belong to the marginalized social strata.

Over the past decade, the situation of Roma has worsened in all fields throughout Europe and without Europeans being aware of it. This not only applies to our region; it is valid for all the former communist countries. A [report](#) by the Council of Europe states that Roma people in a majority of member states suffer from numerous forms of discrimination: "They are too often the subject of discrimination, marginalization and segregation in education, employment, housing and health care policy". Thus, contrary to the national minorities, Roma people have a double minority status. They are both an ethnic community and a socially disadvantaged and underprivileged group. Further, the Roma community can be seen as transnational or trans-cultural minority – a minority that has more or less adopted the language and culture of the local majority. In this sense, it is said that they are Europe's "most European" people. Accordingly, many researchers see an opportunity for Roma to contribute to a deepening of European integration (Forray, 2012; Forray & Mohácsi, 2002).

## Historical patterns

The nurturing of the Roma intellectual elite is a social policy objective which has the backing of a relatively broad range of public opinion (not only the intellectuals who back civil rights and are willing to fight for such rights). Thinking analogically about the necessary tools and institutional conditions, the experiences of recent decades are of great consequence. Providing opportunities for learning was a typical tool of revealing talent, especially among poor people in provincial areas, in the first half of the 20th century. The aim was that the whole of society should support these young people as they strove for higher levels of education and sought to represent their nation in public life.

This type of talent management reflected the folk-rooted ideology of interwar Hungary and the focus on ethnography and literature. It was manifested in state, church and civic scholarships and in student dorms. An analysis of the movement's goals is given in a monograph by Papp (2012). Dramatic descriptions of rural and farm poverty were made by some of the most significant writers of the era and by sociographic authors. Newly discovered people who had only just become literate were soon respected as remarkable writers (some of them paid with their life for this social change). The movement, which targeted the social integration of the people (mainly rural inhabitants), can view the foundation of the people's colleges ("népi kollégiumok") as a continuation of its dedicated work.

The colleges for the most talented were special halls of residence established with the purpose of creating a special environment for intensive education and research for the most gifted students of the university. Members of the colleges were offered extra lectures, extended seminar programmes and occasional intensive courses on special topics. Their progress was assisted and monitored through tutorials.

The first people's college was founded in 1939 as the Bolyai College (in 1942 it was renamed after the ethnographer István Györfly). The Györfly College was re-established after the war, while the Petőfi Sándor College, comprising historian students, worked alongside it. Together they founded the NÉKOSZ (National Association of People's Colleges), established in 1946. Their operations were terminated when the Hungarian communists seized power in 1949, at which time the people's colleges were sold off. (Although there were subsequent attempts at establishing similar programs – for example, preparing workers for university in a short time – they were unsuccessful.)

During the short existence of the NÉKOSZ movement, hundreds of young people from peasant backgrounds received places in higher education; they were equipped with the intellectual tools for careers in intellectual and professional fields. The people's college and its predecessors offered courses in a college system for young people from disadvantaged socio-cultural backgrounds, who could move into higher social strata having become familiar with the works of the main teachers and philosophers of the era.

The people's colleges had definite socio-political goals in both a fundamental and functional sense. They sought to educate poor peasant children in a short time. To be successful, their education needed to affect their whole identity. The elite identity of the former Eötvös College was based on high academic standards and the selection of a social elite (Kardos, 1978; Kardos, 2000; Papp, 2001; Pukánszky–Németh, 2012; Rottler, 1977, 2002). These characteristics may be evaluated both positively and negatively; in any case, it means talents that are the natural consequence of the selection and the adaptable teaching methods.

The durable impact of NÉKOSZ is evidenced by the fact that for some decades the elite of the former people's colleges played an important role in all substantial innovative or revolutionary social change in 1956 and again after the political changes of 1989.

After the collapse of communism, Roma became a targeted group for emancipation; it was deemed necessary to nurture self-confident and politically active Roma intellectuals. A few young Roma came into higher education, but – similarly to the failed experiments of previous decades – they were not always able to proceed to graduation. Scholarships and other financial support might have been an appropriate tool to encourage Roma to participate in further education. However, such assistance could not always counterbalance the socio-cultural difficulties (Forray & Kozma, 2010). The new Roma colleges represent a special type of the old people's colleges.

## **The present-day Roma colleges**

In our previous study (Forray & Boros, 2009) initiatives were examined which support young disadvantaged Roma to become university graduates. These special colleges share similarities in terms of their aims with the old people's colleges.

The “Invisible College” of the Romaversitas Foundation (students call it the Romver) is regarded as an elite training institution. It was founded on the basis of an earlier civil initiative. Romaversitas was established in 1996 by the Roma Civil Rights Foundation. Until 1998, it worked as an open university with academic summer camps. In February 1998, a full-time program director was delegated by the Roma Civil Rights Foundation to manage the institution. The teaching program was initially supported by the Soros Foundation. More recently, it has been self-financing. The “Romver” draws Roma students in colleges and universities from all over the country and offers scholarships and even foreign language learning opportunities. Students can take part in university lectures and in weekend training courses with scholarships. The location in Budapest, the high standard of presentations and courses – coupled with the older members' strong professional and social position – help to develop the self-confidence of participants.

The Roma College (Gödöllő) was also an “invisible college” and had similar goals. It did not receive support from the Soros Foundation but was sponsored by another foreign organization, also operating in Hungary: the German Friedrich Ebert Foundation. This special college ceased operations because of the lack of funding.

The Wlislöcki Henrik (Roma) Special College (WHS), organized under the Department of Romology at the University of Pécs, was modelled on the pattern of Romaversitas. However, it only works within the University of Pécs, whereby the university students are full or part-time members of it. It primarily defines itself as professional workshop for Roma and non-Roma youth who are interested in Romology. Its objectives are as follows:

“Faithful to the aims of a classic special college, the most important objective is to give space to the professional training of Roma students who wish to continue their studies at the level of higher education. The special college contributes to the training of multifaceted professional and intellectual Roma people with marketable skills. Since relations with society, institutions, and social organizations are essential for all intellectuals, the college caters for students in the technological, economic, and health fields as well as those studying in the humanities or social sciences students. A long-term goal is to guide science-oriented students towards PhD programs and create contacts in the world of work for all.”

Assisting Roma youths to develop their talents and skills are among the priority goals of this special college. Ethnicity is not the only selection criterion, as studies in the field of Romology, including the original languages of the Hungarian and European Roma (Romani and Beas), are also given emphasis (Cserti Csapó, 2012; Orsós, 2012; Varga, 2011).

The college was established in the academic year of 2001–2002, with international (PHARE) support. Under the programme of “For Roma Vocational College Students” a special college was set up for Roma and non-Roma students, bringing together and integrating the students of the various faculties of the University of Pécs who are interested in Roma studies. The success of the early years was followed by funding problems, but thanks to the efforts of students the operation of the special college has been given a new dynamism since the 2004–2005 academic year.

The special college is not a separate legal entity; nor is it self-financing. Rather it funds its activities by means of grants, which are subject to fluctuations. The Romology Department and other departments cooperate, and volunteers also contribute. However, it has its own rooms within the department, which have been furnished and equipped with computers and a library by means of grants. The senior tutor is an official representative and mentor, while other teachers in the department act as supportive members and student leaders also play a crucial role. In 2012, the special college joined the framework providing special

college support from EU funds for Roma. The special college is exemplary, because there have been no other similar initiatives in the past decade in Hungary (Cserti Csapó, 2012).

Although there are several planned activities for each semester, their implementation depends on the interest and commitment of the student leadership. In recent years, the special college took part in organizing exhibitions, film screenings, and cultural events; it organized and conducted conferences (TDK [Scientific Student Conference] and OTDK [Pandemic Scientific Student Conference]); it edited and published a special college newspaper; and it processed romology topics in a cooperative framework. Ethnic identity is given no specific role, as a Roma ethnic background is not an emphatic condition during enrolment. However, an interest in, and commitment to, Roma culture is an important condition.

A new era in the history of the special college began in the academic year of 2012–2013. An opportunity for significant improvements was provided by the New Széchenyi Plan (funding of HUF 240 million). “The development of complex student services for disadvantaged students organized by Wlislócki Henry College” project’s activities, under Széchenyi Plan (SROP 4.1.1 – 12/2/KONV-2012-0009), with efforts to achieve the goals through a complex support system: university graduation especially for disadvantaged Roma university students and the strengthening of professionally and academically prepared intellectuals who are sensitive to social problems.

Students at the special college are supported in their academic, scientific and professional development by senior student mentors and faculty tutors within a broader support system. In addition, efforts are made to develop and manage their skills and competence through various educational and training courses (communication, learning methodology, ICT, language). Academic development is helped by means of research conferences, participation in the conferences, and the Romology magazine. Key aims of the programme are outreach and the involvement not just of university students but also of senior high school Roma students, thereby creating a culture of volunteering in Roma communities and cooperation with other special colleges in Hungary.

The goal is to promote the academic success and social responsibility of Roma students. These Roma special colleges – Romaversitas and WHS – have had an inspirational function in recent years, facilitating the integration of Roma in Hungarian society. Further education and the training of responsible intellectuals are goals supported by EU member countries. (Note that although funding is available, similar successful initiatives in countries other than Hungary cannot be found on the internet). In addition, new initiatives were launched in Hungary, this time by the churches.

The recently established Christian Roma Special College Network aims to “educate identity-preserving Christian Roma intellectuals, who are trained in many ways and who seek a high level of professional work and are committed to representing their church community” (Forray, 2012). The programme has a central management, which coordinate the activities. Some of the institutions are based in university towns.

The Christian Roma special colleges receive HUF 120 million of government funding, which is spent on infrastructure improvements and the operation of the institution. Under the New Széchenyi Plan, an additional sum of HUF 1.15 billion has been made available for a three-year professional program. The task is to develop talent and support participation in higher education. An additional objective is to make students sensitive to social problems. An effort is made to bring such identity elements into alignment with the identities of the students, thereby helping to create a more complete self-image. Christian Roma intellectuals participate in various courses aimed at high standards of professional work and the representation of their church communities ([romagov.kormany.hu](http://romagov.kormany.hu)). The goals are similar to those of WHS, but here the churches and Christian ideology also receive emphasis.

The denominational special colleges are the following: the Jesuit College (Budapest), the Greek Catholic Student Roma College (Miskolc), the Roma Lutheran College (Nyíregyháza), the Presbyterian College Roma (Debrecen), and the Roman Catholic College (Szeged). The various colleges receive separate funding, allocated to them in the context of the EU development programs for 2012. In the first year, 15–20 students are located in each special college, and according to plans their number will increase

annually. Currently, there are a hundred students in total. The Jesuit College has played a particularly important role: this Budapest institution initiated the denominational Roma special colleges and encouraged the active support of the churches for the higher educational studies of Roma youth.

The students' access to the colleges is based on a written application and an entrance examination. Students receive accommodation and full board. (Currently, neither Romaversitas nor WHS offer this service for the whole period of study.) As special college members, they must participate in workshops, which mostly address issues of general education, personality development courses, as well as the religious events of the denomination concerned.

The most important similarity between the colleges is that all of them recruit their members from among Roma, looking for young people with potential who are seeking help. Each special college tries to expand the horizons of students and motivate them in higher education. Each student's career will be monitored in the course of future research.

Similar initiatives supported by the European Union suggest that this form of support can be an effective means of supporting the higher education of young Roma people. As a public policy, it can raise the educational level of ethnic groups.

## Summary

The aim of this article was to present initiatives aimed at offering support to Roma students. Improving the employment and educational situation of Roma people is a priority for the European Union. It is generally recognised that Roma in the EU – and especially in the new EU member states – require assistance in this field.

The historical review sought to highlight two important aspects. On the one hand, we have outlined the domestic initiatives which, since the late 1960s, aimed to promote the education of Roma children and youths. In general, these initiatives were a failure. After the collapse of communism, Roma in Hungary became one of the recognised Hungarian minorities, similarly to the Germans, Croatians, and Romanians. In some places, ethnic Roma (minority) schools were established. The Soros Foundation introduced scholarships for successful Roma students. Subsequently, the main problem was not ethnicity but poverty; overcoming problems of exclusion from school was prioritised. Recently, in the light of experiences made in the past two decades, higher education has received special attention.

In this regard, the objectives of the people's college movement were reviewed. The people's colleges of the 1930s and 1940s were effective in promoting education among Hungary's most marginalised social stratum – the poor peasantry. Perhaps similar institutions for Roma in our era will be as successful as their predecessors.

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