



Assessment of the Economic Impact of Roma Integration Strategies: A Comparative Study of NGO and Government Efforts in Bulgaria

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Abstract

This study examines the effectiveness of various strategies aimed at integrating the Roma population in Bulgaria, focusing on the efforts of the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The main goal is to analyze and compare the approaches of both parties, emphasizing their economic impact on the integration of Roma children and their families. The research also looks at how the interaction between the MES and NGOs can be optimized to achieve better integration results for the Roma population, as well as to increase the efficiency of resource utilization and funding.

Subject Areas

Economics

Keywords

Roma Integration, NGOs, Ministry of Education, Strategies, Economic Effect

1. Introduction

The Roma ethnic group represents a significant portion of the population of Bulgaria. According to the latest statistical data, the number of Roma people in the country is around 325,343. The Roma is known for their rich cultural heritage and diversity, but they often face social isolation and economic hardships. Historical challenges and the lack of effective integration policies have led to significant disparities in quality of life and economic opportunities between the Roma population and the rest of Bulgarian society.

The aim of this study is to conduct a comparative analysis of the integration strategies for the Roma implemented by non-governmental organizations (NGOs)

and the government in Bulgaria, with a special emphasis on their economic effectiveness. The study will address questions regarding which strategies prove to be most logical from an economic perspective, what obstacles hinder their implementation, and what opportunities exist for optimizing resources and efforts for better results.

Both quantitative and qualitative results from initiatives by NGOs and the government will be analyzed to identify successful practices and potential areas for improvement. Particular attention will be given to the economic benefits and costs associated with different strategies, aiming to identify those approaches that yield the greatest return on investment and most effectively support the economic integration of the Roma people.

The role of the Ministry of Education in supporting integration efforts will be specifically considered, with recommendations proposed for increasing funding in certain areas and optimizing expenditures in others to achieve better outcomes. Through the analysis of various approaches and their economic significance, the study aims to contribute to the understanding of the effectiveness of integration strategies and to offer practical solutions for improving the social and economic status of the Roma in Bulgaria.

2. Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative methodological approach, which includes observations and document analysis. Qualitative research is suitable for a detailed investigation of complex social phenomena, such as the integration of the Roma, as it allows for an in-depth understanding of the context and nuances of the issues being examined.

One of the primary methods used in the study is the observation method. This method involves visiting schools that enroll children of Roma origin. Through direct observation of the educational process, interactions between students and teachers, as well as the overall atmosphere in the learning environment, data was collected regarding the actual state of integration efforts. On-site observation enables the identification of practical challenges and successful practices that may not be reflected in official documents and statistics.

Another key method employed is the analysis of existing documents and reports. For this purpose, a number of documents were reviewed and analyzed, including government strategies, reports from non-governmental organizations, and international studies. These documents provide valuable information about current policies and programs for the integration of the Roma, as well as the outcomes of their implementation.

Sources such as the report “Educational Achievements of Roma Communities in Bulgaria” and other similar studies conducted by NGOs were utilized for comparative analysis. By reviewing these reports, key indicators of success and failure of various strategies were identified, along with obstacles to their effective implementation.

The selection of schools and documents for the study was carried out using non probability sampling, which ensures the representativeness of the collected data. The study involved 15 schools located in Roma neighborhoods, including 75th Todor Kableshkov, 59th Vasil Levski, and 106th Grigorii Cambalak, among others. Each school had a student population ranging from 300 to 600, providing a diverse sample size across these educational institutions. Schools were chosen based on their demographic structure and the presence of Roma students, while documents were selected based on their relevance and reliability.

3. Data Analysis

Non-governmental organizations in Bulgaria implement various educational programs aimed at improving literacy and educational achievements among Roma children. They provide learning materials, scholarships, and extracurricular activities. Many NGOs organize training for teachers to help them better understand the needs of Roma students. The programs often include parental advice initiatives that encourage active parental involvement in their children's educational processes.

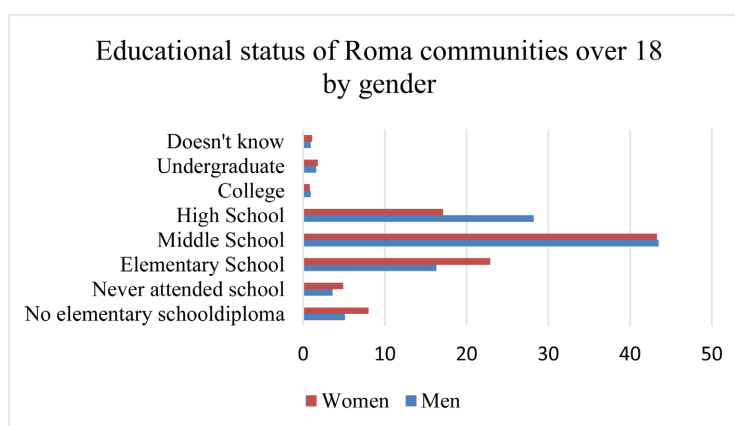


Figure 1. Educational status of Roma people by percentages [1].

The chart illustrates the educational background of Roma people aged 18 and older, separated by gender (See **Figure 1**). It shows a range of educational levels, from those who have never attended school to those who have completed undergraduate studies. A significant portion of both men and women finished middle school, which appears as the highest attainment for many. Men have a slight edge in high school completion, while women are more likely to have only completed elementary school or less. The percentage of individuals with higher education—college or undergraduate—is minimal for both genders. This data points to significant educational gaps, both within the Roma community and between genders.

Examples of NGOs and initiatives:

- **Amalipe Center:** This organization works to promote the educational integration of Roma children through programs such as “Folklore of the Ethnicities—

Roma Folklore”. They provide learning materials and organize extracurricular activities, as well as training for teachers and parents. In addition, “Amalipe” aims to reduce absences and prevent early school dropout through mentoring and mentoring programs.

- **“Roma Cultural and Information Center”:** Organizes cultural and educational initiatives that aim to improve the understanding and acceptance of Roma culture in society. The center also provides legal advice and assistance in finding a job.

Is the student currently attending school?

Table 1. Results from a Booster program in 2019 [1].

	<i>Corsample 2019</i>	
	Yes	No
Ages 7 - 10	95.30%	4.70%
Ages 11 - 14	91.60%	8.40%
Ages 15 - 18	63.00%	37.00%
Overall	84.10%	15.90%
	Booster 2019	
	Yes	No
Ages 7 - 10	90.90%	9.10%
Ages 11 - 14	93.50%	6.50%
Ages 15 - 18	73.50	26.50%
Overall	86.20%	13.80%

These initiatives aim to reduce early school dropout rates and enhance motivation for learning among Roma children. Successful programs demonstrate significant increases in literacy and better educational outcomes. This is evidenced by the fact that in 2019, the majority of students aged 7 - 18 were attending school, with notable improvements seen in the “Booster 2019” group. For example, in this group, school attendance for ages 15-18 increased from 63.0% in the core sample to 73.5%. Overall attendance also rose from 84.1% to 86.2%. These figures suggest that targeted interventions, like booster programs, can lead to better educational participation, which is often a key indicator of improved literacy and learning outcomes (See **Table 1**).

Parental involvement in the educational process also plays a crucial role in maintaining sustainable results. Teacher training improves the understanding and approaches to Roma students, leading to a better learning environment. For instance, programs like “Friends of Roma Education” have achieved a reduction in early school dropout rates by up to 30% in certain areas.

The main challenges include limited financial resources and the need for long-term support. NGOs often rely on projects with limited funding, which can

constrain the duration and scale of programs. Additionally, cultural barriers and a lack of trust from Roma communities can hinder the effective implementation of programs. For example, the shortage of adequately trained teachers who understand the cultural specifics of Roma children can lead to ineffective teaching and low educational outcomes.

Overcoming stereotypes and discrimination, as well as ensuring sustainable funding for the programs, also poses obstacles to their effectiveness. For instance, the lack of understanding and acceptance of Roma culture by the wider public often results in social isolation and discrimination.

Strategies of the Ministry of Education and Science (MES)

The Ministry of Education and Science (MES) implements programs aimed at ensuring access to preschool education for Roma children. These programs include the provision of free learning materials and meals, as well as training for teachers to work in a multicultural environment. MES programs often rely on public-private partnerships, which involve collaboration with local authorities, NGOs, and international organizations.

Program examples:

- **“Support for Preschool Education of Disadvantaged Children”**: This program provides financial support and resources for Roma children of preschool age. It also includes training for teachers and the provision of a suitable learning environment.
- **“Education for All”**: This program focuses on training teachers and providing learning materials for children. It also includes initiatives aimed at parents to encourage their involvement in the educational process and to foster their support.

Through these programs, the Ministry of Education aims to ensure an equal start for all children, including Roma, by providing the necessary resources for a successful educational process. Providing free learning materials and meals alleviates the financial burden on families and increases attendance in preschool institutions. Teacher training also enhances the quality of teaching and their ability to work in a multicultural environment. The “Support for Preschool Education of Disadvantaged Children” program has led to a significant increase in attendance and success for children in school. Other programs funded by the Ministry include those from NGOs, such as the “National Program for Supporting Students from Ethnic Minorities” and “Educational Mediators”, which aim to improve the academic outcomes of Roma students and promote their inclusion in the educational system.

The main challenges include ensuring sufficient financial resources and personnel for the implementation of the programs, as well as overcoming cultural barriers and stereotypes that can hinder the effective inclusion of Roma children in the educational system. For example, in some areas, the lack of preschool institutions or their limited capacity poses a serious obstacle to access to quality preschool education for Roma children.

The Ministry of Education provides scholarships and financial support to Roma students who achieve good results. Additionally, the ministry organizes supplementary activities and courses to enhance the academic preparation of Roma students. The programs also include support for teachers, enabling them to work more effectively with children from diverse cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, the programs involve parental advice and collaboration with NGOs to promote family support for education.

- **“National Program for Supporting Students from Ethnic Minorities”**: This program provides scholarships and financial support for Roma students who achieve good results. It also includes support for organizing extracurricular activities and courses.
- **“Educational Mediators”**: This large project involves the appointment of educational mediators who work directly with Roma families and students to ensure better inclusion in the educational process and provide support.

Providing scholarships and financial support encourages students to achieve better results. Additional activities and courses help students catch up on gaps and better prepare for their studies. The “National Program for Supporting Students from Ethnic Minorities” has led to an increase in the number of Roma students who complete primary and secondary education.

4. Economic Effect of Roma Integration Programs: NGO and MES Programs

4.1. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

1) “Amalipe”

One of the organizations that works most actively towards the integration of the Roma population is the Amalipe Center. They focus on reducing early school dropout rates and improving the educational outcomes of Roma children. The center also provides learning materials, extracurricular activities, and training for teachers and parents.

The funding for the center comes from various sources. While the organization receives financial assistance from the Ministry of Education, this funding accounts for only 0.99% of their overall budget. The largest source of their revenue comes from projects funded by other organizations, which constitutes 29% of their income (See [Figure 2](#)).

One of the projects that Amalipe is working on is “Every Student Will Be a Excellent”, supported by the Trust for Social Achievement (TSA). The main activities are focused on preventing dropouts and keeping Roma children in school, increasing the number of reintegrated (re-enrolled) children and boosting the participation of adult Roma in lifelong learning opportunities.

Amalipe has achieved significant results, working with 200 schools and 1500 youth at risk of dropping out in 2020, and expanding to 297 schools by 2023, reaching 56,455 students, with 900 successfully returned to school and nearly 4000 trained teachers, among many other accomplishments.

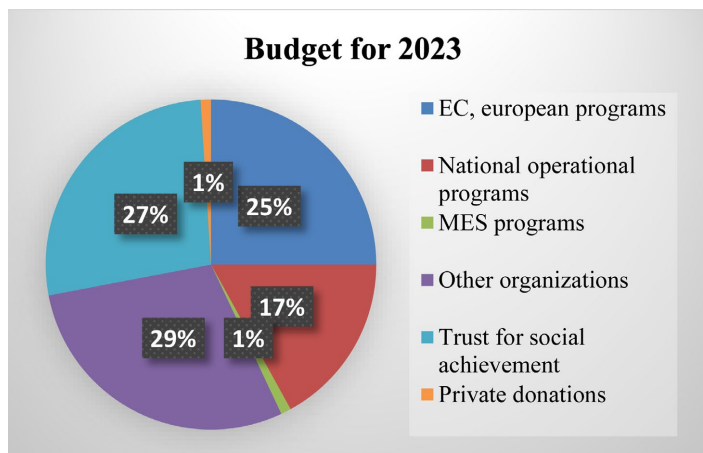


Figure 2. Amalipe's budget sources in 2023 [2].

The positive outcomes of the program include a reduction in absences and dropouts by up to 30% in certain schools. Increased parental involvement in the educational process also leads to better student performance. Economically, the successful implementation of the program enhances the educational preparation of Roma children, increasing their chances of future employment.

2) "Integro Assosiation"

The Integro Association is an organization aimed at supporting Roma communities by improving their socio-economic status, promoting social integration, and overcoming discrimination against the Roma ethnic group. The organization's work is made possible through its partners and donors, including the ROMACT program, the Bulgarian-American Society, and the Trust for Social Alternatives.

3) "Leader Assosiation"

One of the organizations actively working on youth development in Bulgaria is the Leader Association. They focus on providing quality education and career development for young people from various social groups, including the Roma community. The organization aims to promote social integration and professional realization among youth through diverse programs and projects, utilizing innovative approaches and modern technologies.

The majority of funding for the Leader Association comes from various national and international programs, foundations, and partnerships. Among the most significant sources of funding are projects implemented in collaboration with European funds and local institutions.

One of the key projects of the organization aims to enhance the leadership skills of Roma youth, encouraging them to take responsibility in their communities and motivate their peers to become more active. Another primary goal of the organization is to increase entrepreneurship and access to employment and economic development within the Roma community.

The Leader Association also actively collaborates with local communities and institutions to create a sustainable environment for youth development. Their

initiatives lead to significant outcomes, including better integration of young people into society and increased competitiveness in the labor market.

4.2. Programs of the Ministry of Education (MES)

1) “Support for Preschool Education of Disadvantaged Kids”

This program provides free educational materials and meals, as well as training for teachers to work in a multicultural environment. While there is no public access to the exact amount of funding, the significant purchase of materials suggests that the investment is quite substantial. The program has led to a notable increase in attendance and success among Roma children in school. Economic benefits include a higher educational level and a reduction in future social support costs.

2) “Education for All”

This program focuses on teacher training, providing educational materials, and initiatives to involve parents. It contributes to improving the quality of education and increasing the chances of successful integration of Roma children into society. Economic benefits include reduced unemployment among Roma and enhanced workforce productivity.

3) “National Program for Supporting Students from Ethnic Minorities”

This program provides scholarships and financial support for Roma students. It aims to encourage students to achieve better results and reduce early school dropout rates. Economic benefits include an increase in the number of graduates and their future employability.

4) “Educational Mediators”

The program involves appointing mediators who work directly with Roma families and students. Mediators help improve the integration of Roma children into the educational process and increase their academic success. Economic benefits include reduced social costs and improved educational levels among Roma children.

4.3. Economic Impact of the Integration Programs

The economic effects of the integration programs implemented by NGOs and MES are significant. They include reduced social costs, increased workforce productivity, and improved educational quality. Investments in educational programs and social integration initiatives lead to long-term benefits for both the Roma community and society as a whole. Successful integration of the Roma is crucial for Bulgaria’s economic development and for reducing social disparities.

4.4. Less Effective Programs

While many programs implemented by MoES show positive results, some have proven less effective and do not justify the funds invested in them. These programs often have high costs but weak outcomes regarding the educational and social integration of Roma children. Here are some examples:

1) “Digital Education for All”

This program aims to provide digital devices and internet to students from

minority groups, including Roma. It seeks to improve access to educational resources and enhance digital literacy among Roma students. Despite significant investments, the results of the program have been disappointing. Many of the provided devices are not used effectively due to a lack of adequate training for students and their parents. Additionally, internet connection in many Roma neighborhoods remains problematic, limiting access to online resources.

Reasons for Inefficiency

- **Lack of Consistent Training and Support:** There is insufficient ongoing training and support for both students and their parents, which limits the effective use of resources provided by the programs.
- **Inadequate Infrastructure and Connectivity Issues:** Many Roma communities face infrastructural challenges and connection problems, making it difficult to implement educational programs successfully.
- **Weak Participation from Local Authorities and Communities:** Limited involvement from local authorities and community members hinders the effective execution of the programs and reduces their impact.

The program fails to achieve significant positive economic effects due to the low utilization of the resources provided and a lack of real progress in digital literacy among Roma children.

2) “Inclusive Education for All”

The “Inclusive Education for All” program focuses on integrating students with disabilities and special educational needs, including Roma children. The goal of the program is to ensure equal access to education by providing additional resources and specialized support for students with special educational needs.

Despite good intentions, the program has not achieved significant results. Key issues include:

- **Shortage of Qualified Personnel:** There is a lack of trained professionals who can adequately support students with special needs.
- **Insufficient Support for Teachers and Parents:** Teachers and parents do not receive enough assistance or resources to effectively support the inclusion of students with special educational needs, leading to challenges in meeting their educational needs.

The program does not achieve significant improvement in the educational outcomes and social integration of Roma children with special needs.

5. Comparison

The integration of the Roma population is a key factor for the socio-economic development of Bulgaria. The programs implemented by both non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) aim to improve education, healthcare, and the social integration of the Roma. This analysis examines the effectiveness and economic impact of these programs, focusing on costs, outcomes, and long-term benefits.

5.1. NGOs: Efficiency and Economic Results

Non-governmental organizations such as the Amalipe Center, Roma for Democracy, and Integro often achieve significant success with limited resources. For example, the Amalipe Center aims to reduce early school dropout rates and improve the educational outcomes of Roma children. Positive results include a significant reduction in school absences and dropout rates, as well as an increase in student achievement.

5.2. Strengths and Weaknesses of NGOs

The strengths of NGOs include their flexibility and innovation in developing and implementing programs. They often employ a personalized approach tailored to the specific needs of Roma communities. Additionally, NGOs manage to engage local communities and build trust, leading to better outcomes.

The weaknesses of NGOs are related to limited funding and dependence on donors, which can result in instability and the discontinuation of programs. The lack of sustainable financing can limit the scale and scope of their efforts.

5.3. MES: Efficiency and Economic Results

The Ministry of Education and Science (MES) has significantly greater resources compared to NGOs but often achieves lower results. MES programs are aimed at improving access to education, healthcare, and social services for the Roma population. Despite substantial spending, there is often a lack of efficiency in implementation and monitoring due to the absence of a personal approach and direct engagement with the Roma community.

5.4. Strengths and Weaknesses of MES

The strengths of the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) include its broad reach and the ability for long-term planning and program sustainability. Government programs have the potential to serve a wide range of beneficiaries and provide consistent support.

However, the weaknesses of the MES include bureaucracy and a lack of flexibility, which make it difficult to quickly adapt programs to the changing needs of Roma communities. There is often a lack of a personalized approach and local engagement, leading to lower effectiveness.

5.5. Economic Effect and Sustainability

The economic effects of both NGO and MES programs are significant, though their approaches and outcomes differ. NGO programs often demonstrate higher efficiency at lower costs, thanks to their personalized approach and local community engagement. This leads to better educational outcomes, lower unemployment rates, and improved healthcare among Roma communities, ultimately contributing to economic growth and social stability.

On the other hand, MES programs, despite substantial spending, often suffer

from a lack of efficiency and flexibility. Bureaucratic procedures and insufficient local engagement can limit the impact of these initiatives. Nevertheless, government programs have the potential for long-term sustainability and can provide consistent support to Roma communities (See **Figure 3**).

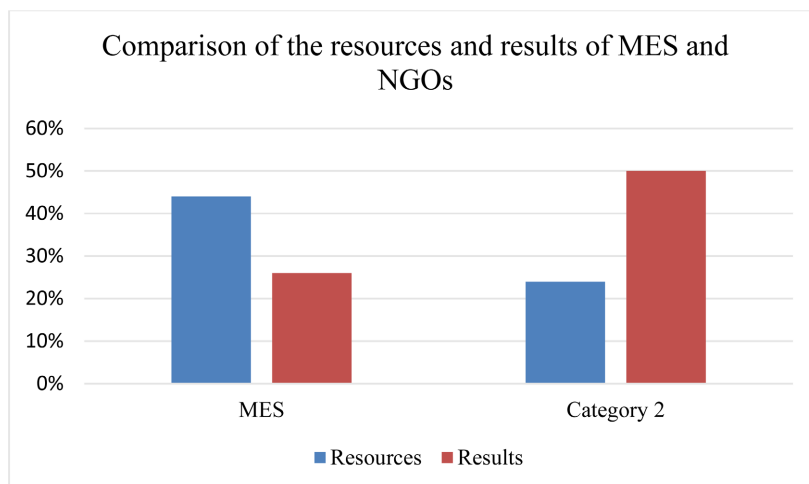


Figure 3. Comparison of resources and results of of MES and NGOS.

6. Conclusions

Both the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) make significant efforts to achieve positive integration of Roma children and their parents into the educational system. However, the approaches taken by the two sides differ considerably. Most MES projects focus on providing funding for various programs and NGOs, offering material resources and financial support. This includes investments in infrastructure, educational materials, and technical assistance, which are essential for the successful implementation of projects.

In contrast, NGOs adopt a more personal approach, working directly with the target group—Roma children and their families. They manage to build trust and address the specific needs of the community by conducting training sessions, providing mentorship, and offering individual support. This closer and more personalized contact often results in significantly better outcomes compared to the larger, but less flexible, initiatives of MES.

While NGOs often show considerably better results in many cases, they frequently rely on MES funding to carry out their activities. However, the funding provided by MES comes from higher authorities and is constrained by strict budgets allocated to specific projects.

To achieve the best possible outcomes in the integration of Roma children, the collaboration between MES and NGOs must continue and even deepen. It is crucial to increase the funding and time dedicated to projects that demonstrate significantly better results, directing resources where NGOs have proven success. MES has substantial resources, but to achieve sustainable results, these resources

must be focused on initiatives and programs that already show real progress. This will ensure the effective use of available funds and guarantee long-term positive change in the integration of Roma children into the educational system.

While this research offers significant findings, there are a few limitations to consider. One key limitation is the relatively small sample size, which may influence the extent to which these results can be applied to a broader population. A larger sample would likely yield more comprehensive insights. Additionally, the methods used in this study, though fitting for the research objectives, come with certain drawbacks. For instance, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of bias, as participants may not always provide fully accurate or objective responses. To build on these results, future research could benefit from expanding the sample size and adopting a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods for a more thorough analysis.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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