



THE SITUATION  
OF TRANSCARPATHIAN  
ROMANI FAMILIES  
FLEEING FROM  
UKRAINE  
TO HUNGARY



ROMA  
VERSITAS  
FOUNDATION

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# 1

## INTRODUCTION

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has left millions of people displaced. Since February 2022, around 100,000 Roma have fled from Ukraine to European countries, including Hungary, mainly from Transcarpathia.<sup>1</sup> Hungary has become a destination too, primarily for the Hungarian-speaking Roma of the Transcarpathian region. Romaversitas Foundation, as a Roma-led Roma community education organisation, has been following the situation of Romani refugees since the outbreak of the crisis. In collaboration with several civil organisations, we are organising to help Romani families fleeing the war in Ukraine, with particular attention to the needs of children. A significant milestone of this work is this assessment report based on several months of research by six Romaversitas students. Over the summer, the student researchers collected 161 interviews with Roma families who fled from Ukraine since the beginning of the war. With the help of civil and church organizations, we have reached multiple shelters from all over the country where Romani families have been accommodated. Our research is only a snapshot of the situation of Transcarpathian

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<sup>1</sup> According to the latest information from Roma Women Fund Chirikli, a Ukrainian Roma organisation (Chirikli, 2022). <http://www.chirikli.com.ua/index.php/en/library/item/275-since-february-2022-about-100-000-roma-fleeing-from-the-war-in-ukraine-to-the-eu>

Roma in the protracted crisis. Nevertheless, it is a good step toward filling the information gap on Romani refugees and a sound basis for civil discourse.

The first chapter mainly focuses on the reflections of Romani civil actors: those who were present at the border from the beginning of the war with the explicit aim to ensure that Romani refugees receive equal treatment and adequate care when arriving in Hungary. As a contextualisation, the next chapter maps the living conditions of Roma in Ukraine as a multiply marginalised social group. In the third chapter, we look at the circumstances of the families' arrival: the structural features of the Hungarian asylum system and the experiences of Roma at the border. Based on our data collection, we then report on the current state of Transcarpathian Romani families living in Hungary as asylum seekers, which we examine according to the main pillars of social inclusion: housing conditions, labor market situation, and the education of Romani children. Finally, we conclude our report with the reflection of researchers, which complements our data and opens the door to a more informed dialogue on the formal and informal processes of ethnic segregation and discriminatory practices.

## 2

### REFLECTIONS OF CIVIL ACTORS

Since June 2022, Romaversitas has been in contact with Roma and non-Roma NGOs involved in some form of support for refugees arriving in Hungary. Since 2015, the Hungarian government has systematically demolished the asylum system. In the absence of adequate state infrastructure for reception and assistance, civil society organisations stepped in to respond to refugees' needs at the outbreak of the war. Networking and information sharing among civil actors is essential precisely because it is local civil actors who face some of the most pressing practical difficulties in providing care for refugees. Along this line, the reflection of Romani activists is of paramount importance in the discourse on Roma refugees. Romani volunteers and activists have been following the fate of those arriving from Ukraine, specifically of Romani refugees: they have been present at the border, doing important work in both housing Romani refugees and following up on their situation. Their experiences provide an account of a range of discriminatory and prejudicial mechanisms surrounding the situation of Romani refugees and how they have sought to counter these in their work.

Romani refugees have experienced that Romani refugees have frequently been treated differently from non-Romani refugees by the authorities at the border. According to a Romani activist we interviewed, a good example of a quite open form of different treatment was when the mayor ordered the closure of tents run by the municipi-

ality and the Reformed Relief Service after a train carrying around 300 Romani refugees arrived in Záhony. Access to legal aid and official information was also hampered for Roma at the border: Romani families had been waiting at the Záhony railway station for several days without receiving any help from the authorities.<sup>2</sup> They were also stopped more often than non-Romani refugees and were spoken to in a derogatory manner by the authorities and sometimes by staff of non-Roma organisations.<sup>3</sup>

The presence of Romani activists ensured that the Roma also received adequate care. Typically, they interacted first with Romani refugees, assessed their needs, and, where appropriate, took action against discriminatory or degrading behavior by other actors present. Romani activists have also complained to the Ombudsman about cases of discrimination. Still, when writing this report, the Ombudsman did not propose investigating the violations based on the complaints. Romani activists also played an essential role in the housing of Romani refugees. As discussed in more detail below, Romani refugees got accommodation mainly in mass housing. Initially, this was largely coordinated by Romani activists, who collaborated with church and civic organisations and municipalities to identify which of their institutions could provide accommodation for Romani families seeking asylum. In many cases, they helped to arrange their arrival. They also ensured that Romani families had access to food, clothing, and toiletries and assisted them with registering for temporary protection status.

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<sup>2</sup> Also reported by 24.hu on 27 February 2022 (24.hu, 2022a). <https://24.hu/kozelet/2022/02/27/orosz-ukran-haboru-karpatalja-zahony-romak-menekultek/>

<sup>3</sup> A more detailed analysis of the atrocities against Roma refugees was published in Mércé on 25 March (Mércé, 2022). <https://merce.hu/2022/03/25/menekultvalsag-a-felulrol-szitott-migransgyulolet-orzagaban/>

Nevertheless, multiple non-Roma organisations also assisted Romani refugees in restarting their lives in Hungary. Romaversitas Foundation contacted several Roma and non-Roma organisations who have been focusing on Romani refugees' situation since the war outbreak. Most of these actors are specifically involved in the education of Romani refugee children or willing to cooperate with other organisations in this field. In particular, as regards to the education of Romani refugee children, the reflections at the NGO level in May 2022 are as follows:

- On average, most organisations have worked with 15-35 Romani children.
- NGOs report that in the context of social inclusion of families, it is crucial to address the fact that children face severe disadvantages at school.
- In addition to their underachievement, another problem is that even in Hungarian schools in Transcarpathia, children learn completely different curricula.
- In this context, according to their resources, several organisations have initiated special educational and development programs, activities, camps, or schools, mainly or exclusively for Romani refugee children.
- Those organisations that did not have the capacity to undertake such activities at the time of the survey would also need information transfer and cooperation related to the educational opportunities for children.

According to a Romani activist, the social inclusion of Transcarpathian Romani refugees goes beyond civil networking. The resources and capacities of local organisations are finite, and the complex problems around Romani refugees' well-being cannot be left to civil society alone. Meaningful progress also requires policy and legal actors at local and international levels, major donor agencies, and decision-

makers to engage in the discourse, considering the recommendations of local actors. Therefore, there is a need for defined action plans based on methodologies proposed by local civil society and the domestic development of international policies, legal obligations, and good practices on asylum care.

# 3

## RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

The present report on Romani families fleeing from Ukraine to Hungary is based primarily on interviews conducted with affected Romani families between 15 July and 15 September 2022. However, the research project does not reach its goals with this summary of our research data: with this report, Romaversitas aims to initiate a discourse among NGOs assisting Romani refugees on the need for complex and targeted assistance; and on the formulation of recommendations in this regard. In this context, the project is based on the practice-oriented methodology of action research, which explicitly seeks to achieve immediate change on a given social problem by involving the relevant actors and people affected by it<sup>4</sup>.

Our research also differs from traditional research environments in that we have sought to significantly reduce the social distance between the researchers and the target group. The research was carried out by Romaversitas students who identify themselves as Roma: Jennifer Balogh, Lilla Eredics, Ernő Kadét, Orbán Oláh, Dániel Szűcs, and Ádám Virág. This position helped to bridge the social gap between the researchers and the target group and facilitated the development of rapport and dialogue with Romani families.

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<sup>4</sup> (Hohmann et al., 2021; Somekh, 1995)

During the data collection, we conducted 161 semi-structured interviews with Romani refugees. Although it was not a requirement, our database mainly included Hungarian-speaking Roma from Transcarpathia, with only two respondents from the Kyiv region. We conducted questionnaires throughout the country, mainly at the respondents' accommodations and at distribution points of NGOs and church organisations. Thus, we conducted interviews in Budapest, Pest County, Szabolcs-Szatmár County, Debrecen, Fonyód, Békés, and Győr. Regarding gender, our survey is not representative: as men typically worked at the time of the survey, only 20 men were reached. Beyond primary demographic data, the questionnaire covers topics such as the living conditions of respondents in Ukraine, the circumstances of their arrival, and questions about their current state, labour market situation, and children's education.

# 4

## TRANSCARPATHIAN ROMA IN UKRAINE



## ROMANI COMMUNITIES IN UKRAINE

According to various estimates, the number of Roma in Ukraine ranges between 200,000 and 400,000. Still, the social status of the various linguistically and culturally diverse micro-communities - Serb, Russian, Olah, Lovari, Kalderash, Hungarian, and Crimean Roma - is quite heterogeneous. Their living conditions depend to a large degree on the regional and local socio-economic environment and the inter-ethnic relations embedded in it. Although the reliability of official statistics is questionable, the last census in 2001 showed that the largest number of Roma communities live in the regions of Transcarpathia and Odesa and that more than a quarter (29.4%) of Roma in Ukraine are Transcarpathian.<sup>5</sup>

Regarding Roma's living conditions in Transcarpathia, a historical-geographical determinant is that the region has been exposed to multiple regime changes in the 20th century, and it has been peripherally positioned in each state formation, far from infrastructural centers. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Transcarpathia has become one of the most economically depressed areas of Ukraine,

forming the border periphery of the western region. Due to its poor natural resources, the region's economic potential is severely limited and brings inadequate infrastructure; high unemployment and labour shortages; high levels of labour migration and depopulation; local inter-ethnic tensions and segregating micro-politics.<sup>6</sup>

Mainly Hungarian-speaking Roma inhabits the Transcarpathian region, who typically do not speak Ukrainian or Russian. As the majority of the families we interviewed, they live primarily in the Hungarian-inhabited districts of Berehovo, Mukachevo, Uzhhorod, and Khuzta, which are located in the flatlands of Transcarpathia.<sup>7</sup> As shown in *Figure 1*, 40% of the respondents came from Berehovo,

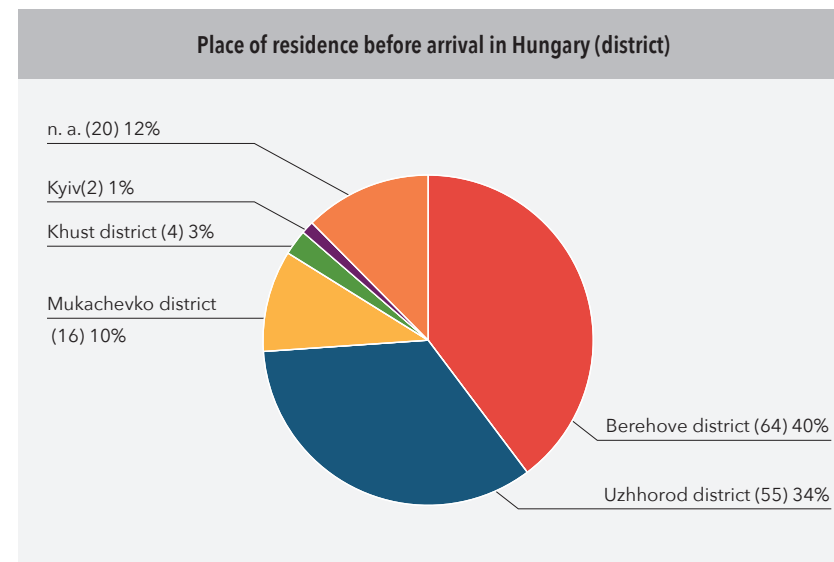


*Figure 1 – Place of residence before arrival in Hungary*

<sup>5</sup> (Braun et al., 2010, p. 17; Tsivily, 2022)

<sup>6</sup> (Borbély, 2015; Braun et al., 2010)

<sup>7</sup> (Braun et al., 2010)

34% from Uzhhorod, 10% from Mukachevo and 3% from Khust. Two respondents answered that they came from the Kyiv region, and 12% of respondents did not answer in which district they live within Transcarpathia.

**LIVING CONDITIONS  
OF TRANSCARPATHIAN ROMA**

Roma in Transcarpathia live predominantly in „Romani camps” on the outskirts of villages and towns. There are about 120 Romani camps in Transcarpathia. The most numerous segregated camps are in Mukachevo, where around 7,000 Roma live, and in Berehovo, where about 6,000 Roma live on the outskirts of the city. Here, the local government has built a 2.5 m high wall to separate Romani people’s poverty from the city’s everyday life.<sup>8</sup> Without sufficient data, it is not possible to draw concrete proportions on the percentage of Roma families arriving here who lived in Romani camps. However, since the literature suggests that Romani residents of Hungarian districts tend to live in camps, we can assume that the majority we interviewed came from such segregated circumstances. In addition, only a few mentioned that they had left the camps and settled in more central areas.

Romani camps are located far from the local institutional infrastructure (kindergarten, school, church, doctor’s surgery, pharmacy, groceries, municipality, cultural center, etc.). Frequently there is no piped water, sewerage, piped gas, waste disposal, or concrete roads in these camps. The housing conditions are also inadequate. Many Roma live in overcrowded houses and mud huts in need of renovation. As seen in *Figure 2*, our data shows that 36% of the families who arrived had no running water, 33% had no heating, and 38% had no electricity.

<sup>8</sup> (Braun et al., 2010; Tsivily, 2022)

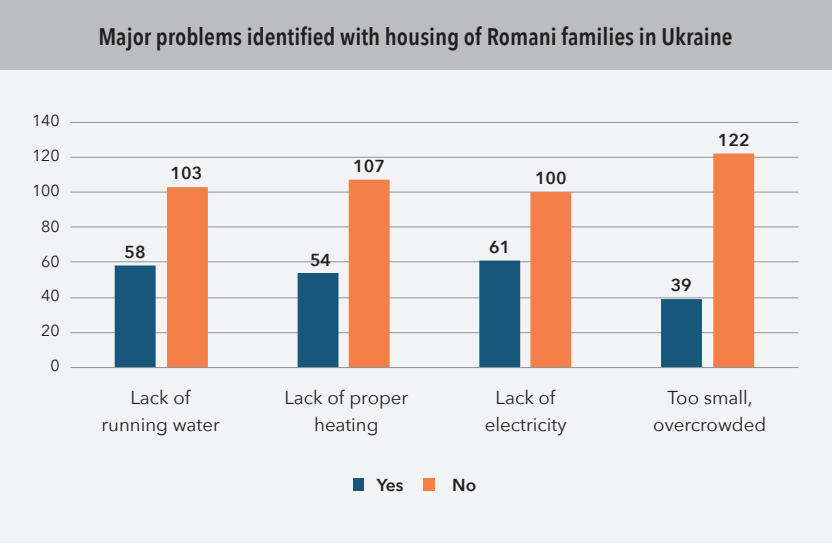


Figure 2 – Romani families’ housing conditions in Ukraine

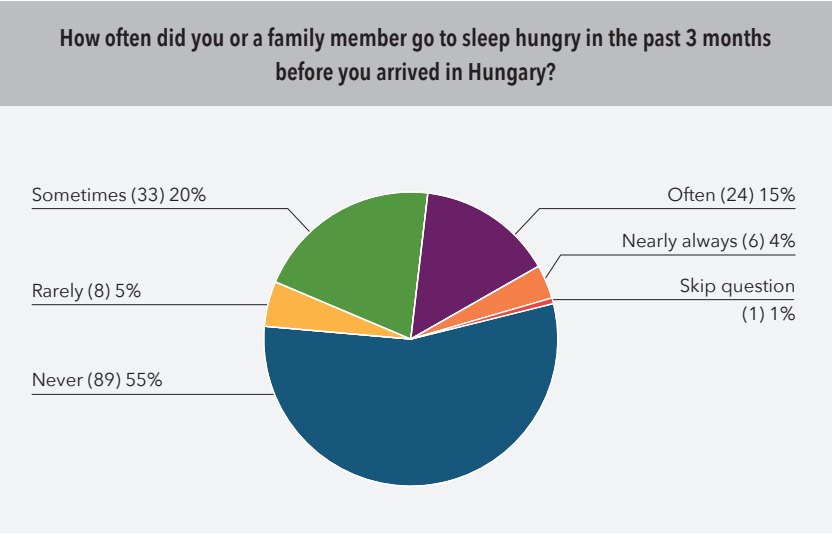


Figure 3 – Household hunger scale among Transcarpathian Romani families in Ukraine

In addition, 23% of those surveyed considered the place where they used to live too crowded. It is important to note that several respondents seemed reluctant to answer these questions, with many refusing to do so. In addition, we can assume that by piped running water and gas, more respondents also meant water from drilled wells and heating with stoves. More telling is *Figure 3*, which shows that almost half of the respondents (44%) said that at least once, a few times, often or almost always in the 3 months before arrival someone in the family went to bed hungry.

And although 91% of respondents in our survey lived in their own property, as the Roma Women Fund Chiricli report points out, it is common for Roma in Ukraine to own property without a title deed, putting them at risk of eviction.<sup>9</sup> For instance, one of our respondents had to move with her three children to relatives because the area of camp had been evicted to build a parking lot.

**TRANSCARPATHIAN ROMA'S  
LABOR MARKET SITUATION IN UKRAINE**

In Transcarpathia, where unemployment is generally high, Roma is almost completely excluded from the regional labour market. According to rough estimates by Roma NGOs, only 38% of Roma living in Ukraine is employed. Romani women's disadvantages in the labour market are compounded as they have even fewer job opportunities alongside which they can take care of reproductive tasks at home. In addition, illiteracy and early school leaving rates are even higher among Romani women. As a result, the primary economic strategy for Roma is labour migration within Ukraine and to neighboring European countries. For Transcarpathian Roma, Hungary is the main

<sup>9</sup> (Tsivily, 2022)

destination for work.<sup>10</sup> Our research confirms this. 36% of respondents, 56 people, knew someone from Hungary before they came here. For 33 of the 56 respondents, this was either through their workplace, male relatives, or acquaintances working in Hungary.

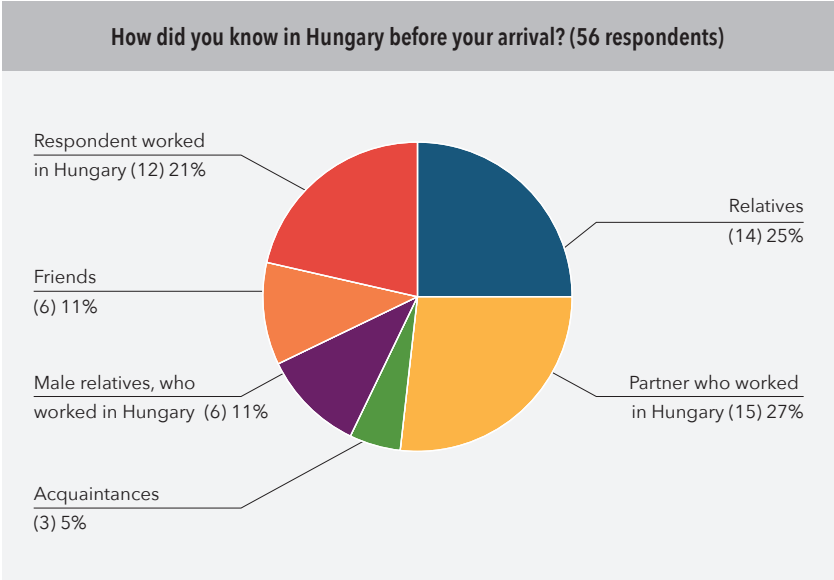


*Figure 4 – Contacts in Hungary before the war*

<sup>10</sup> (Borbély, 2015; Tsivily, 2022)

## TRANSCARPATHIAN ROMANI CHILDREN IN EDUCATION

It is first important to mention the fundamental differences between the school systems of Hungary and Ukraine. Ukrainian education differs from the 12-year school system in Hungary, which has three levels of education - primary lower 1-4; primary upper 5-8; secondary 9-12. The Ukrainian school system is based on 11 grades, with primary level from 1 to 4 grade, secondary base level from 5 to 9 and secondary last level from 10 to 12. In Transcarpathia there are both Ukrainian and Hungarian language schools.<sup>11</sup>

According to research by Braun, Csernicskó, and Molnár in 2010, as the majority of Roma in Transcarpathia are concentrated in Hungarian-inhabited districts, the highest numbers of Romani pupils are also found in here. According to education statistics from 2009, there were 1104 Romani children enrolled in schools in the Berehovo region, 1267 in the Mukachevo region, and 1358 in the Uzhhorod region, the vast majority of whom attended Hungarian schools. According to the same survey, Transcarpathian Romani pupils often continue their education only up to the 9th grade, so very few reach secondary education.<sup>12</sup> Most of the children of whom families we interviewed were of school age, i.e. had completed primary grades 1-4 or secondary grades 5-9 in Transcarpathia before the war. The number of children over the age of 16 in the arriving families was significantly lower. Still, among them, the number of those who would have started secondary last education, i.e. grade 10, in Ukraine was negligible.

Segregating features are also evident in the education of Romani children in Transcarpathia. As highlighted in the Roma Women Fund Chiricli report, there are at least 15 schools in Transcarpathia with a 50-70% Romani children ratio and eight schools with more than 70% Romani children.<sup>13</sup> Most of the parents we interviewed (47%) said that their children went to a school/preschool where some of the children were Roma, 22% said that the majority of the children in the school were Roma, and 25% said that all the children in the school their child/children went to were Roma. Only a few respondents answered that their child/children went to a school of only non-Romani students.

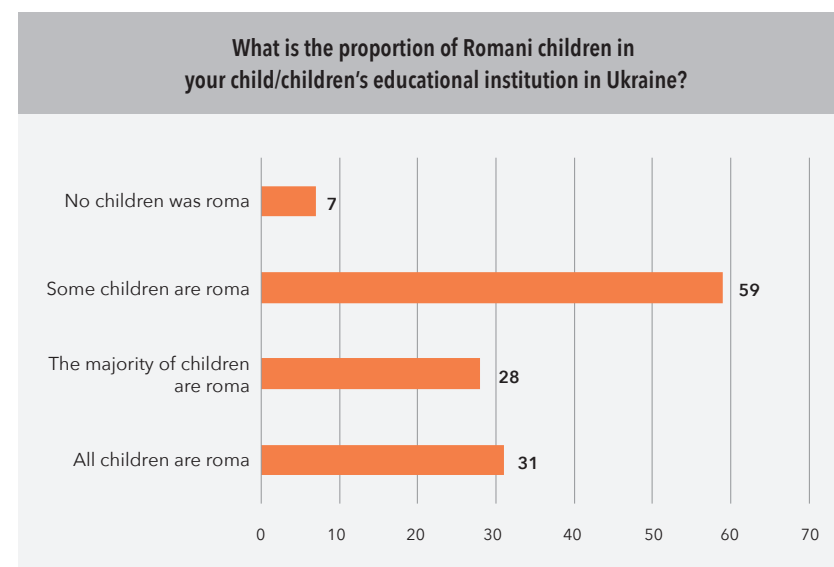


Figure 5 – Percentage of Romani children in schools in Ukraine

<sup>11</sup> (Cséke & Fónai, 2018)

<sup>12</sup> (Braun et al., 2010, pp. 52–79)

<sup>13</sup> (Tsivily, 2022)

The Roma access are in poor conditions, do not provide adequate education, and children often drop out of school for lack of proper clothing, shoes, or other everyday necessities to go to school. This was exacerbated by COVID-19, with many respondents reporting that their children had not participated in online education due to the lack of technical equipment.<sup>14</sup>

**ETHNIC TENSIONS AGAINST  
HUNGARIAN ROMA IN TRANSCARPATHIA**

Regarding inter-ethnic tensions, Hungarian-speaking Roma in Transcarpathia are in a multiply vulnerable position, as they are exposed to prejudice and exclusion as both Hungarian and Romani minorities. This complex relationality is also reflected in our research. For example, when we asked the respondents about their experience of racist verbal abuse, 59% said they had not, while 40% had occasionally or often encountered racist language. Interestingly, added that they were exposed to atrocities not due to their Romani but to their Hungarian origins. However, in the case of a multiply marginalised social position, it is difficult, and perhaps even pointless, to dissect whether their Hungarian or Romani origin leads to derogatory language.

Respondents reported experiences that authorities treated them in a demeaning way in public institutions, the bus did not stop for them when they waited, and non-Romani locals talked to them in a rude, racist manner in interactions. Many also recalled their own experiences at school, where other children and teachers treated them in a discriminatory way. In addition, when looking for a job, several respondents often found that they were rejected because of their origin or were ostracized at work by non-Romani and/or Ukrainian

colleagues. One respondent who had a house outside of camps in the centre of locality, had no experience of racism. She emphasized that primarily those living under extremely segregated conditions in camps were harassed.

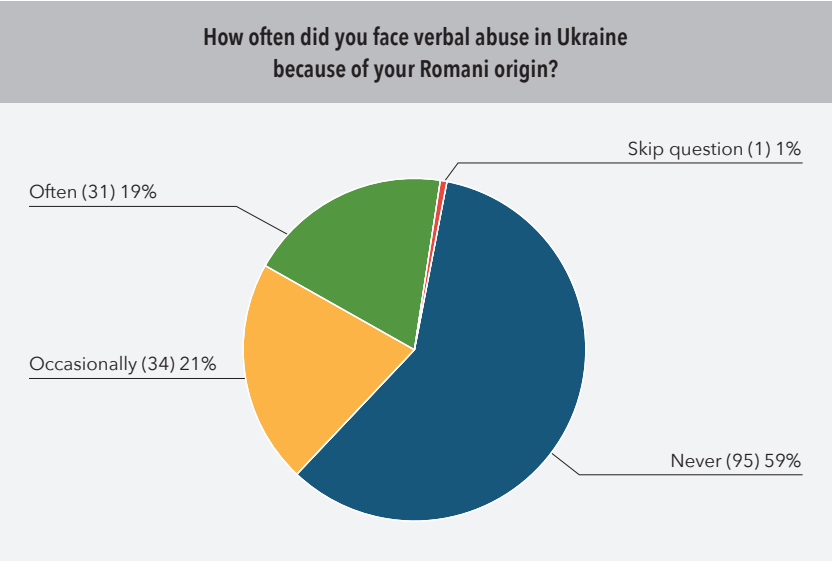


Figure 6 – Prevalence of verbal abuse in Ukraine

<sup>14</sup> (Tsivily, 2022)

# 5

## THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF ARRIVAL

After the breakout of the Russian military aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022, millions of people fled the country to seek refuge in EU countries and the Republic of Moldova. However, as highlighted in the RORN [Refugee Outreach and Research Network] summary, there may be a significant gap between the number of refugees arriving in Hungary from Ukraine and the number registered in the protection system. According to a statement by the Ministry of Interior in May, 578,531 refugees have arrived in Hungary, while other government figures range between 700,000 and 1 million. However, the latest figures from the UNHCR show that only 30,000 people have registered in the Hungarian asylum system since the outbreak of the war. It is worth comparing this with data from neighboring countries: 75,000 out of 425,000 refugees have been granted temporary protection in Slovakia. One million out of 3.6 million people got protection in Poland.<sup>15</sup>

The relatively low number of registered refugees might have several reasons. On the one hand, we can assume that many refugees arriving in Hungary do not seek protection but continue their journey to other countries. On the other hand, in 2011, the Hungarian govern-

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<sup>15</sup> Assessment of ROR-n of the refugee situation and asylum systems in neighbouring European countries in June (Müller, 2022). <http://www.ror-n.org/>

ment introduced the Simplified Naturalisation Act, a simplified procedure for Hungarians living abroad to obtain Hungarian citizenship. Following the law, by 2015, some 94,000 Transcarpathian Hungarians had been granted dual citizenship and thus Hungarian passports, typically for employment purposes.<sup>16</sup> According to the Helsinki Committee, although Hungarian citizens cannot apply for asylum status as Ukrainian citizens and their relatives, they are entitled to the benefits and advantages that go with this status.<sup>17</sup>

However, in the first weeks of the war, NGO workers often reported that due to a lack of adequate infrastructure, not all those who arrived at the border were adequately informed about the opportunities available to refugees and the registration process required. In this light, it would be difficult to estimate how many remained unregistered, how many refugees currently reside in Hungary, and how many came from the Romani communities in Transcarpathia.<sup>18</sup>

The uncertain and opaque circumstances of Romani families' arrival are reflected in our research. 59 out of 161 respondents, or 37% of the total sample, said they had temporary protection status as Ukrainian citizens. 43 (27%) said they have dual Ukrainian-Hungarian citizenship and thus did not gain temporary protection status. 18% of respondents, i.e. 30, said that they had received a temporary residence

<sup>16</sup> Ukrainian news on the impact of the simplified naturalisation law (Tuzhansky, 2018). <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/articles/2018/09/20/7087153/>

<sup>17</sup> Information for Ukrainian-Hungarian dual citizens who fled from Ukraine-<https://helsinki.hu/tajekoztato-az-ukrajnabol-menekulo-ukran-magyar-ketos-allampolgaroknak/> (Magyar Helsinki Bizottság, 2022)

<sup>18</sup> Átlátszó wrote about the situation of refugees arriving here as a result of the war (Átlátszó, 2022). <https://atlatszo.hu/kozugy/2022/08/24/magyarorszag-nehany-tizezer-ukrajnai-menekultet-sem-kepes-rendesen-el-latni-civilek-vegzik-az-allam-segelymunkajat/>

certificate [ITI]. In addition, 14 respondents stated that they are Ukrainian citizens but do not yet have temporary protection status, and the remaining 10% of respondents did not understand the question or did not answer.

As the press also reported, the accommodation, transport, food, and hygiene supplies for Romani refugees arriving in the country were mainly organized by civil society and church initiatives.<sup>19</sup> Of 161 respondents, 93 said they had received help and guidance at the border. They highlighted NGOs, social workers, and workers from church organisations, who primarily assisted their well-being. Among them, 44 are Ukrainian citizens who have been granted temporary protection

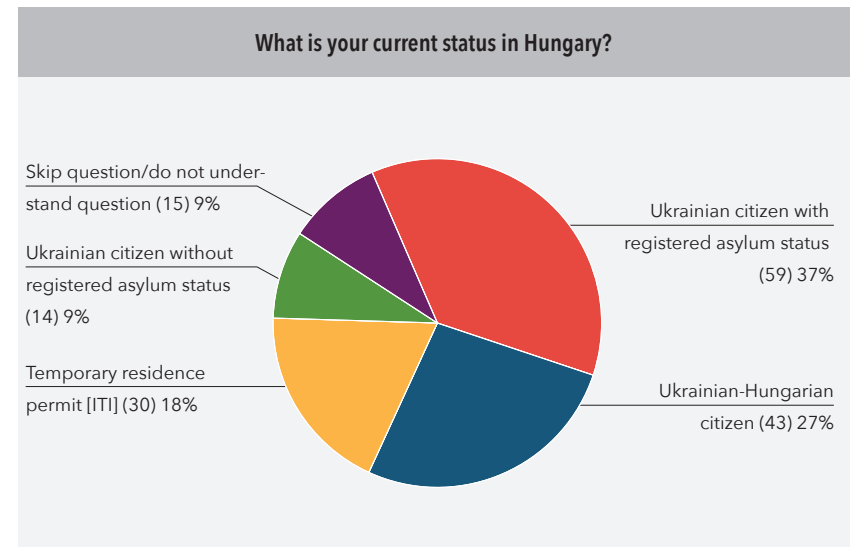


Figure 7 – Status of Romani families in Hungary

<sup>19</sup> (Átlátszó, 2022)

status, 3 who have not yet been granted temporary protection status, and 16 are dual Ukrainian- Hungarian citizens. 41% of the respondents said they had not received any help with the administration, of which 25 are dual citizens, 9 are Ukrainian citizens without asylum status and 25 have managed to get temporary protection status or ITI despite the lack of help.

And although most respondents reported that civil workers and activists were helpful to them at the border, the process of arriving in Hungary was overall stressful for all. Mainly women with children arrived among the Transcarpathian Roma by bus or train, but some simply walked from border villages to Hungary. It was typical for families to have to wait for a long time for the train/bus, and on arrival at the border, families would spend hours or even a whole day waiting to find out where they could be accommodated. The men were either already in Hungary through their jobs or were unable to cross the border due

to military service. The few men who had arrived from Ukraine after the outbreak of the war had typically escaped to Hungary irregularly, either on foot or by swimming across the Tisza.

Some refugees only pass-through Hungary or stay for short periods because they settle permanently in other countries. However, Hungarian-speaking Romani families from Transcarpathia typically do not have the opportunity or the network of contacts to travel further, and most men had already worked in Hungary before the war. Therefore, the current situation and future of Transcarpathian Romani families depend primarily on the Hungarian state care and support services. And, as it happens, the vulnerability of Romani refugees in this situation is further increased by the general prejudice and discrimination against Roma.

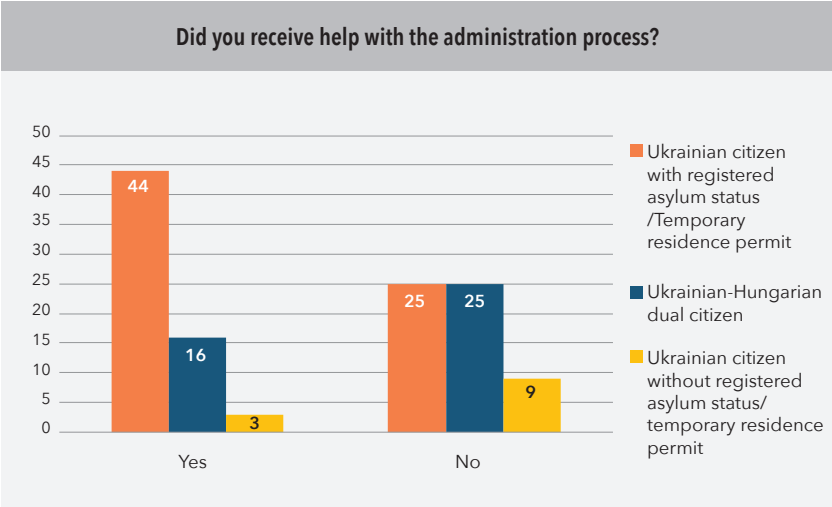


Figure 8 – Ratio of registered to non-registered asylums by administrative assistance received



# 6

## THE SITUATION OF FLEEING TRANSCARPATHIAN FAMILIES IN HUNGARY

### THE HOUSING SITUATION OF ROMANI REFUGEES

As mentioned earlier, the research involved 161 interviews in 18 locations, 16 of which were in refugee accommodation and the remaining two in the distribution points or community spaces of civil organisations that assist Romani refugees. Along the way, the researchers learned about the current housing conditions of the respondents and their families. Refugees fleeing the war in Hungary have arrived in a dismantled refugee system and a social benefit system that is fundamentally under-resourced and under-capacitated.<sup>20</sup> As a result, primarily civil and church organisations and municipalities established temporary and long-term accommodation facilities, at some places in cooperation with disaster management authorities.

Our data shows that Transcarpathian Romani families rarely accessed preferential or reduced-price private housing. Of the 161 respondents, only 49 were placed in reduced price private housing, 110 were placed with their families in refugee shelters at the time of the survey.

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<sup>20</sup>(Pósfai & Szabó, 2022)

Romani refugees typically accessed private housing through civil organisations' housing programs. This usually meant either that civil workers helped refugee families to find private houses on a solidarity basis or the organisation acted as a housing agency to conclude rental contracts with landlords hosting refugee tenants. They have also provided rental assistance to families through funding from larger donors such as the UN.<sup>21</sup> The living conditions of Romani refugees in private housing greatly vary. The Romani families Romaversitas researchers accessed generally lived in poor, crowded conditions in the outskirts of districts VIII or X in Budapest.

Romani families thus typically received accommodation in mass shelters. These shelters were usually established out of civil, church, and municipal institutions where the infrastructure to accommodate large numbers of people was available or could be quickly developed. At the time of the survey, Roma refugees resided in emergency housing institutions such as homeless shelters and temporary shelters for families, workers' dormitories, and summer camps.

Due to the limited time to adequately prepare for the great number of refugees arriving, the conditions of institutional placement for Romani families were variable and contingent. However, as most shelters were, in fact, only set up to provide temporary accommodation for those in need, the same problems arose in shelters with better or worse conditions. For example, winterisation was difficult or impossible in many accommodation facilities, such as campsites or containers. In addition, there were places where despite the heating being feasible, the winter period seemed precarious due to the difficulty of institutional

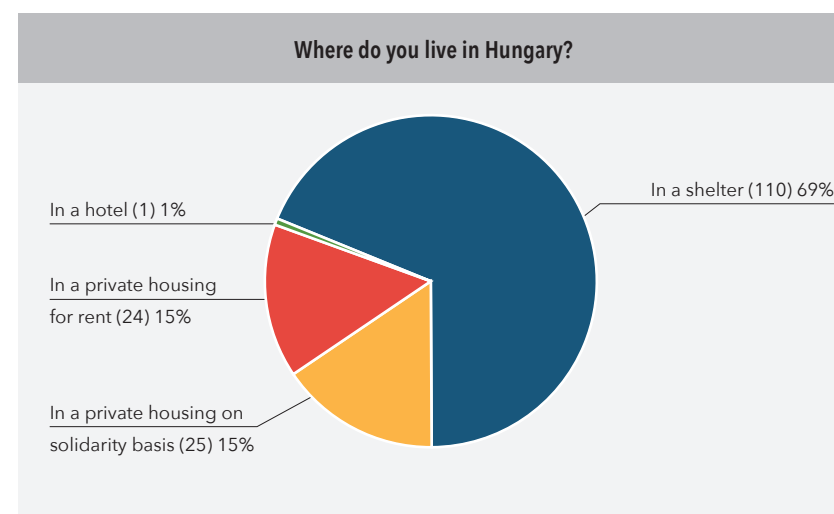


Figure 9 – Housing situation of Romani refugees

financing of the high overheads. Another recurring problem was that, in general, most shelters were overcrowded and cramped. In most facilities, there was an effort to provide separate rooms for each family, but for example, there were only 1 or 2 toilets and showers per more than one family. In some shelters, several generations - grandparents, parents, and children - lived in the same space on bunk beds, but there were cases where a family of 4 had to sleep together on a wider bed in a cramped space. In other places, it was only possible to accommodate several families in one room.

In several cases, problems arose in families' everyday life from the location of the refugee shelter. The accommodations were often located on the outskirts of the locality, far from local infrastructure. For example, we spoke to men who, although they had worked in Budapest before the war, found accommodation with their families in Debrecen, which meant their employment was no longer possible. In some shel-

<sup>21</sup> The 'Utcáról Lakásba Egyesület' [Street to Home Association] helps to house refugee families with rental subsidies(24.hu, 2022b). <https://24.hu/belfold/2022/07/03/utcarol-lakasba-egyesulet-lakhatas-ukrajna-menekultek/>

ters, the local government tried to remedy the situation by organising bus services for refugees to go to school and work. In addition, in several places, the main problem was that families did not feel safe in the given accommodation area. For example, on the outskirts of Győr, where 77 Roma refugees were accommodated in a container shelter in the summer, the local municipality set up a park guard service because strangers harassed families through the fence.

Romani refugee families housed in institutional shelters typically do not have to pay a fee, and municipalities provide three meals daily.<sup>22</sup> However, some families lived in a workers' dormitory in District VIII for 160,000 - 180,000 HUF per month and received no benefits. How is this possible? The interviews suggest that men in the families could mostly work in Hungary in the years before the war by living in workers' dormitories run by a private operator. In the given accommodation, men from Ukraine - a mixture of dual citizens and Ukrainian citizens - worked in the iron industry, paying around 60,000 HUF per person for housing before the war. After the war broke out, the dormitory operator allowed the rest of the family to move in but increased the accommodation cost to three times the original rent. According to the latest information, the operator has stopped providing accommodation to the families because of the increased heating costs. Seven of them have since found accommodation in Aszód for a monthly fee of around 85,000 HUF.

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<sup>22</sup> Information note from the Ministry of Human Resources for family and child welfare service providers to support families from Ukraine: [https://szocialisportal.hu/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Menekult-Tajekoztato\\_osszedolgozott\\_vegleges\\_0525.pdf](https://szocialisportal.hu/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Menekult-Tajekoztato_osszedolgozott_vegleges_0525.pdf) (Emberi Erőforrások Minisztériuma, 2021)

## THE LABOUR MARKET SITUATION OF ROMANI REFUGEES

In the long term, a stable position in the world of work and a steady source of income is of paramount importance for the social inclusion of refugees. However, refugees fleeing war are, by definition, insecure in the labour market of a hosting country. Moreover, finding stable work is more difficult by a lack of local knowledge, networks, information sources, language barriers, and prejudice against foreigners.<sup>23</sup> The labour market situation of Transcarpathian Roma is even more complex.

On the one hand, as discussed earlier, over the past 6-7 years, specific sectors requiring unskilled labour have become increasingly open to Romani and non-Romani workers from Ukraine. As a result, it is easier for men to find jobs, even for those who have not previously taken up work in Hungary. An even more significant problem is the employment situation of Romani women, who may face less favorable labour market conditions. Many Romani women arrived with young children; as discussed in more detail below, their older children did not have access to kindergarten/school in Transcarpathia and Hungary. Employment opportunities are also hampered by the fact that many Romani women in Transcarpathia have not even completed their primary education. Finding a job remains difficult as long as they are left to take care of the children and household chores.

Based on our data collection, it would be difficult to talk about gender-specific employment rates, as only 20 of the 161 interviews were with male respondents. This is because the researchers visited most sites mainly during working hours when men were at work.

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<sup>23</sup> (Budai, 2022)

The 20 male respondents were, therefore, more likely to include those who, for some reason, did not work at all (8) or only occasionally (6), and compared to the actual numbers, far fewer of those who were employed on a regular basis (6). Based on field experience and interviews, most Romani men - the majority of whom were therefore not included in the data - worked in the construction or the iron and steel industry.

Looking at the employment rate of women is telling in itself. As seen in *Figure 10*, 71% of the 141 female respondents referred to themselves as stay-at-home mothers or unemployed, two respondents did not work due to illness, and only 15% of female respondents, 21, could find a permanent job. Those who did work were typically in cleaning or kitchen assistant positions, but some worked as goods assemblers in the food industry, and some worked in elderly care. And although

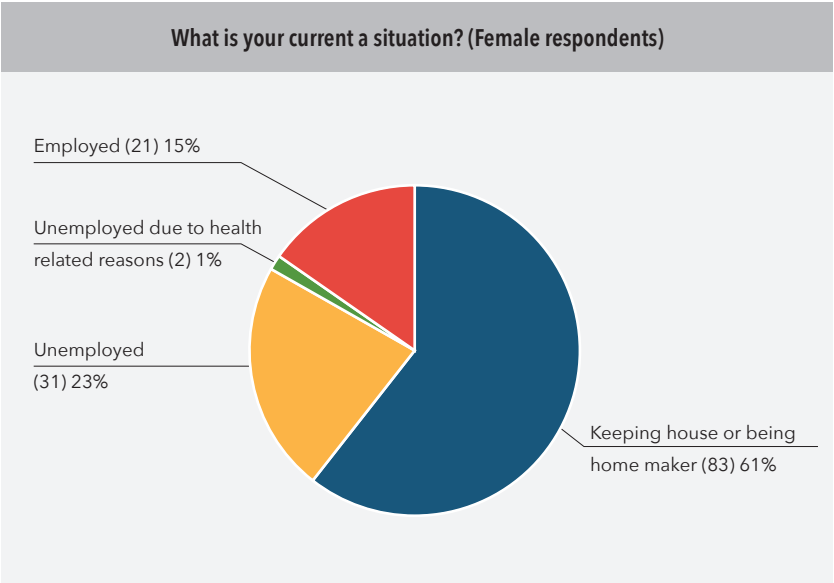


*Figure 10 – Romani refugee women’s employment situation*

the questionnaire did not include a question on this, we did encounter refugees who had been unknowingly undeclared by their employers, employed without a contract or had had their wages withheld.

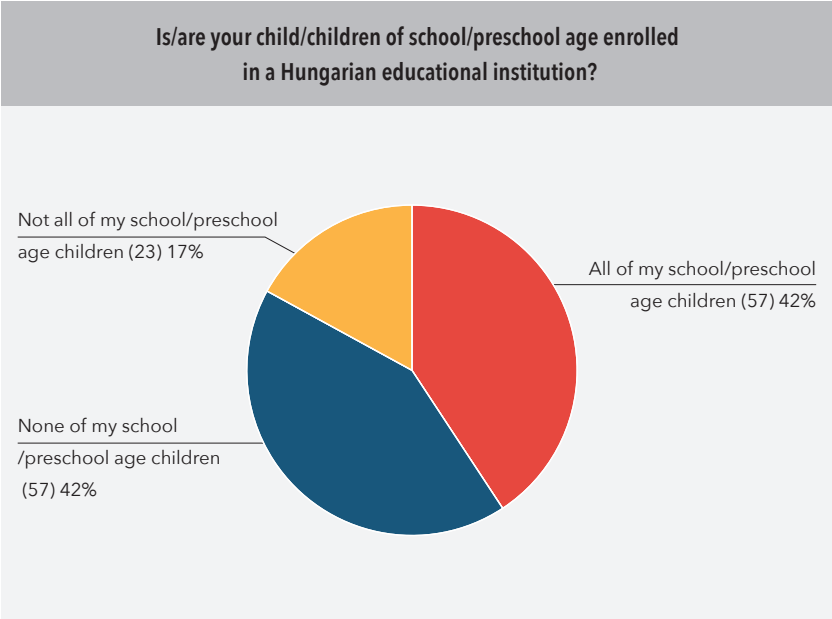
**TRANSCARPATHIAN ROMANI CHILDREN  
IN EDUCATION**

It is vital for children fleeing war to receive regular education as soon as possible. As the literature points out, any educational activity provides order to daily life, an essential element of a child’s sense of security. In Hungary, asylum-seeking children have the right to public education from the moment they apply for asylum. All children become obliged to attend school once they have been granted asylum status. For refugee children with dual Hungarian-Ukrainian citizenship, school is also compulsory, and they must be enrolled in their residence’s district school or kindergarten.<sup>24</sup> However, in the overburdened Hungarian public education system, schooling/induction can be a complex administrative and emotional process for refugee parents and children, with Romani refugee children being a particularly vulnerable group in many respects.

Our data show that only 41% of all school-age/preschool-age Romani children were enrolled in education at the time of the survey. In addition, 17% of parents responded that not all their children reached school/preschool who are of school/preschool age, and in 57 families (42%), no school/preschool age children had entered public education. And since the vast majority of those surveyed, 127, arrived immediately after the outbreak of the war, or in March, and only 18 between May and September, it would be wrong to think that the summer break was the main reason for the low number of Transcarpathian Romani

<sup>24</sup> (Bognár & Hetzer, 2022)

children in public education. Among those who arrived around February and March, the proportion of children enrolled in school/preschool was similarly low: only 46 families had all children of school/preschool age enrolled in school/preschool, and 21 families had children enrolled at the time of the interview but not all. Furthermore, 46 responding parents had no children of school/preschool age enrolled in school/preschool. In addition, it was typical that parents considered not only formal school/preschool institutions as enrolment in public education but also any kind of activity for children run by civil organisations. When this is taken into account, it is even more worrying that a significant number of children did not even get any informal daycare/educational activity.



Why did so few Romani children in Transcarpathia have access to education/preschool at the time of the survey? On the one hand, school enrolment is preceded by several administrative steps - such as a registered address, social security number, NEK form - challenging to navigate without local knowledge and assistance. On the other hand, as several of them confirmed, for the Romani refugee families, many of whom have not even been properly informed about their status and benefits, these steps are complicated without assistance. In addition, several respondents whose children had not been enrolled in public

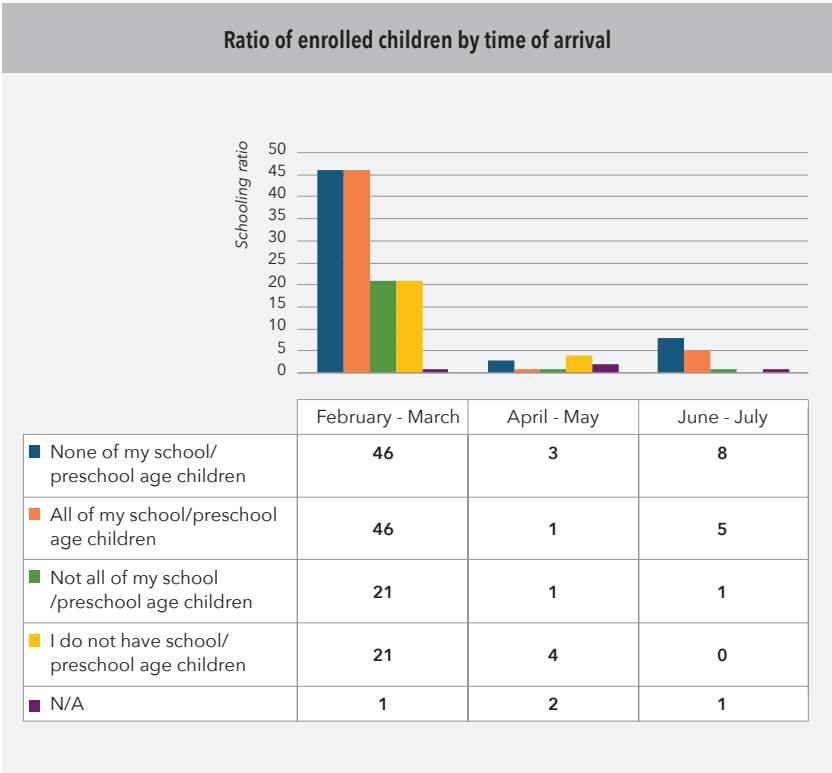


Figure 12 – Ratio of Romani refugee children attending school/preschool in Hungary by time of arrival

education referred to the fact that they did not know where their children would be living from September on and, in this light, which district school/ kindergarten they would have to attend.

It is important to note that the pre-existing educational disadvantages of Transcarpathian Romani children also further undermine their chances of enrolling in public education. For example, those who have reached the age of 16 typically already dropped out from the Ukrainian education system, in many cases even earlier. As the compulsory school age in Hungary is 16, they are not detected by the system here, and they probably enter the world of work. In addition, as many families are not registered at all, children who are still in compulsory school age but are already teenagers are likely to drop out. As seen in the graph below, there were plenty of families where children over 16 and older children of school/preschool age did not get go to school/preschool, and only the younger ones reached Hungarian public education.

It is also important to report what children who have accessed some educational activities have experienced, as parents perceive. Some were in formal public education, but most children participated in educational activities run by civil and church organisations. Some said their child would only attend public school in September. Most parents considered the particular educational activity to be appropriate and rated the teachers as accommodating and attentive. However, because many children in Transcarpathia had no access to a proper level of education for their age group, children who received formal education were, in many cases, demoted to a lower grade.

We also asked what they consider the biggest challenges in sending their children to school/ kindergarten. Most parents mentioned that they could not provide their children with adequate equipment and clothing to go to school, and many were concerned about the cost of schooling. In addition, some parents feared that their children would

go to a school where there would not be other children from Transcarpathia. Some parents also experienced that their children who were enrolled in public school were neglected by teachers or were bullied by other peers because of their Roma origin. In many cases, the school was far away from the family's place of residence at the time, making it difficult to manage everyday schooling. In addition, several mentioned that the biggest challenge was the administrative process: having a registered address, registered status, and social security number for the child.

# 7

## REFLECTIONS OF RESEARCHERS

Housing, work, education, and health care are closely interrelated and essential conditions for the social inclusion of the Transcarpathian Roma in Hungary. However, as we have seen, the current living conditions of families are fraught with insecurity, from being unregistered to being housed in mass shelters to children not being able to go to school. But why do Transcarpathian Romani families find themselves in this situation? In what follows, we explore this in the light of the researchers' reflections, highlighting the forms of exclusion that the questionnaire did not directly reflect upon.

Romani refugees' arrival is heavily shaped by hidden and overt mechanisms of ethnic discrimination and segregated placement. There have been numerous reports on Romani refugees not being fully informed, whose long-term accommodation has not been resolved, and who have not accessed the benefits of refugee assistance. It was partly due to the lack of information on the part of border staff that Roma, with dual citizenship from Transcarpathia, were treated as Hungarian citizens at the border and were not informed of the assistance they were entitled to. However, as reported by the NGOs, prejudices and discriminatory attitudes towards Roma also play a role in the fact that Roma remains without assistance. Along these lines, based on our experience, it has happened that even those Roma who did not have dual citizenship were not directed to registration but were treated in the same way as

dual citizens: because Roma in particular, were not treated as refugees at the border, but as Roma.

As we have already pointed out in the reflections of civil actors, the authorities at the border backed their tensions with Roma refugees mainly by ethnicising Roma behavior - with messages emphasising that Roma are loud, dirty, numerous, and have come for aid. Researchers found similar incidents with locals and social workers around the shelters, who were condescending and paternalistic towards Romani refugees. Besides, although Romani refugees had little contact with the local population, conflicts arose occasionally. For instance, in the case of a family in private housing, neighbors resented that children playing in the yard were noisy - to the point of threatening to call the police. It should be added that the family lived in crowded conditions, which made it difficult for the children to stay in the apartment during the day.

Besides, it is a complex issue that relatively few Romani families accessed private housing. The soaring housing prices in recent years have made renting difficult for lower-class social groups. In this situation, impoverished Romani families without stable employment opportunities could not afford to rent under contract, even with rental subsidies. It is also a problem that there are fundamentally few and, since the outbreak of the protracted war, fewer housing offers for refugees. In addition, most offers are temporary, lasting a few months, and Romani families need longer-term housing due to the lack of other prospects. However, it was also clear that Romani refugees were being pushed out of the housing market by the ethnic prejudice of flat owners. Structural inequalities, combined with anti-Roma housing discrimination, cut off Romani families from meaningful pathways out of institutional housing.

Let us turn to the problems around labour market. As detailed above, certain labour market positions are available to Transcarpathian Romani men, which means a secure source of income for families.

However, these essentially low-prestige jobs are not associated with more extensive local knowledge or network of contacts - men typically had no acquaintances in Hungary other than their work colleagues in the years before the war. Thus, it is difficult to imagine that men's labor market position alone will solve the social inclusion of families.

In addition, women typically have little room for maneuver to find work that they can combine with their reproductive responsibilities and their children's schooling. For example, in one family who could find an apartment in District VIII of Budapest, the child needed special needs schooling because of a congenital disease. They found a school in the XXII district that could accommodate the child, but the mother could only find a job in the XI district. This means the mother had to travel about 4 hours from home to school, to the workplace, and back. Another woman could not work because her diabetic son required 24-hour supervision. She would need a school where she could look after her son or a job close to the school, but she does not know what her options are without local knowledge and a network of contacts. Even more so, the discriminatory mechanisms of education and the labour market make it even more difficult for her to access a job or school that meets her needs.

It is worth discussing Romani families' subjective assessment of their situation, which from the researcher's perspective, often seems to be shaped by discriminatory or segregating practices. *Figure 6* shows that those who lived in mass accommodation did not show a significant dissatisfaction with their housing situation compared to those who had access to private housing. 61% of those living in private housing were satisfied with their housing situation, compared to 54% of those living in mass shelters. Our research experience confirmed these rates. In many cases, researchers found that Romani families were explicitly grateful for their circumstances despite their somewhat insecure situation. Most respondents did not report any racist or discriminatory treatment. According to the researchers' reflections, this may be linked



to the fact that these families lived in highly segregated conditions of extreme poverty in Transcarpathia. On the one hand, this means that mass shelters can often provide better conditions than what they had in Transcarpathia. On the other hand, ethnically marginalised communities often do not experience racism in their daily lives precisely because they have almost no access to mainstream social spaces in which they would be subject to such atrocities - social spaces that would be essential for adequate living conditions.

Nevertheless, prejudicial and exclusionary mechanisms in structural processes and interpersonal interactions affect marginalised social groups even if they do not directly articulate these in words. Part of this process is Transcarpathian Romani families’ distrust of social institutions. For instance, one mother from a mass shelter in the agglomeration of Budapest was expecting twins at the time of the survey. Still, for antenatal care, she returned to Transcarpathia because, in the lack of adequate assistance and information, she was distrustful of the local health care system.

Not surprisingly, when we asked families about what they would need to stay in Hungary, they mentioned adequate conditions in housing, work, and children’s schooling. These essential pillars of everyday life present many difficulties and uncertainties for Romani refugees. A sense of insecurity is reflected in the fact that despite most Romani men’s employment in Hungary and impoverished circumstances in Transcarpathia, our respondents would move back to Ukraine in the long term “because that is their home”. However, their future depends mainly on external, yet unforeseen factors. It is a joint task for civil society and international and domestic political and legal actors to ensure that Transcarpathian Romani families also have access to the social infrastructures of everyday life in Hungary.

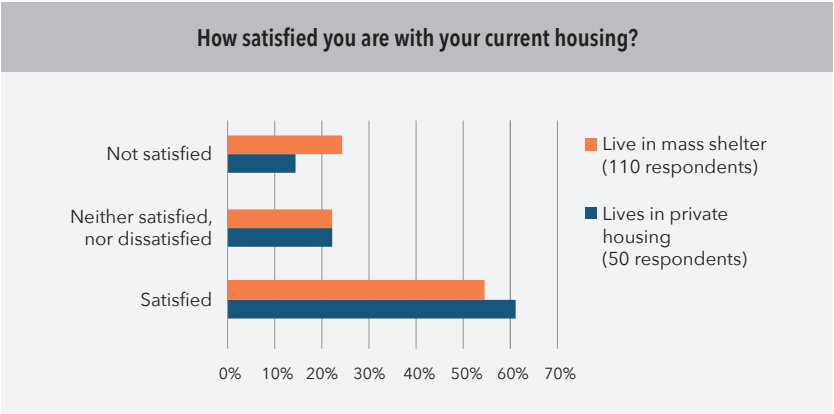


Figure 12: How satisfied you are with your current housing?

# 8

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