

FORCED DISPLACEMENT AND SOCIAL ADAPTATION:
Challenges and Opportunities for Ukrainian Roma Youth
Rebuilding Activism and Access to Rights in Germany

By

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Submitted to

Central European University

Department of Public Policy

In partial fulfillment for the degree of Master of Arts in Public Policy

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Vienna, Austria

2025

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

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Roma Youth Rebuilding Activism and Access to Rights in Germany*

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ABSTRACT

This master's thesis examines the forced displacement and social adaptation of Ukrainian Roma youth in Germany following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The study is based on qualitative interviews, a small-scale quantitative survey, an analysis of integration policies, and theoretical approaches to segmented assimilation, translocality, and vulnerable citizenship. The thesis reveals that Roma youth experience double marginalization as both displaced persons and members of a historically marginalized ethnic minority. Despite the existence of formal rights and protective mechanisms, young Roma often encounter discrimination, institutional barriers, and social isolation. Conversely, youth activism serves as an important tool for adaptation, agency, and transforming vulnerability into a resource for participation. The study highlights institutional shortcomings and successful examples of self-organization, underscoring the importance of supporting youth initiatives in the integration process. Based on these findings, the study formulates recommendations for federal and local authorities in Germany, as well as for civil society, to ensure inclusive and equitable integration policies.

Keywords: Ukrainian Roma youth, forced resettlement, Germany, integration policy, activism, vulnerable citizenship, segmented assimilation, translocality, anti-Gypsyism.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my academic supervisor, Professor Violetta Zentai, for her valuable advice, guidance, and support in preparing this thesis.

I would also like to thank the TENET Analytical Center for giving me the opportunity to participate in the research and use the collected data for this thesis. Their trust and cooperation were important contributions to the realization of this project.

I am also deeply grateful to Dr. Elżbieta Mirga-Wójtowicz for her help organizing field research and conducting interviews with participants. Thanks to her support and professionalism, valuable empirical data could be collected.

Finally, I would like to thank my professors and colleagues in the Department of Public Policy at the Central European University. Their intellectual support, critical feedback, and attention to detail have enhanced my analytical approach and enriched this work's content.

I am also grateful to the Romani Studies Program and the wider CEU academic community for providing a space for intellectual development, mutual support, and solidarity. This experience played a pivotal role in my growth as a researcher.

I am also grateful to all the respondents—Roma youth, activists, and NGO staff—who shared their stories, observations, and hopes with me. Their voices are at the heart of this research.

I dedicate this work to my family and to all young Roma activists who continue to fight for justice, equality, and dignity. Their efforts inspire and give meaning to scientific inquiry.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ADC Memorial – Anti-Discrimination Centre Memorial

Amaro Drom – Roma youth association in Germany coordinating local groups

Amaro Foro – Local Berlin-based Roma youth NGO, member of Amaro Drom

BAMF – Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (Germany)

CEU – Central European University

CM/Rec(2023)4 – Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe
on Roma Youth Participation

CoE – Council of Europe

CSCE – Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (U.S. Helsinki Commission)

CSO – Civil Society Organization

DOSTA – Anti-Gypsyism documentation center in Berlin

ERIAC – European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture

ERRC – European Roma Rights Centre

EU – European Union

EVZ Foundation – Foundation “Remembrance, Responsibility and Future”

FRA – European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights

GMF – German Marshall Fund

HRW – Human Rights Watch

IOM – International Organization for Migration

KYRS – Kherson City Association of Young Roma

NGO – Non-Governmental Organization

OSCE – Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

RAN – Roma Antidiscrimination Network

REF – Roma Education Fund

TENET – TENET Center for Social Transformations

TernYpe – International Roma Youth Network

UN – United Nations

UNDP – United Nations Development Programme

UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Voices of the Roma / Stimmen der Roma – Coalition of Roma organizations in Germany

led by Bundes Roma Verband

CHAPTER 1 – Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 sparked the largest wave of forced migration in Europe since World War II. Among the millions of displaced people were members of vulnerable minorities, including young people from Roma communities. Despite their active participation in humanitarian initiatives and integration processes, the specific needs and challenges of Roma have not been adequately addressed in national or international policy responses. This issue is particularly acute for young Roma individuals, who face additional challenges beyond resettlement difficulties, including discrimination and limited access to education, employment, and social protection. Consequently, they experience a crisis of participation in public life.

This work focuses on Ukrainian Roma youth who migrated to Germany after the invasion and analyzes how their adaptation and activism are changing in the new context. Particular attention is paid to access to basic rights such as education, housing, and healthcare, as well as how young Roma interpret their situation and continue or discontinue their participation in social and human rights initiatives. The study draws on interviews with Roma youth initiative representatives, activists, and staff of organizations that support displaced persons.

The aim is to identify how Germany's political framework promotes or hinders the social integration and civic participation of Ukrainian Roma youth. The study also documents successful practices and, based on empirical analysis, proposes recommendations for more inclusive, minority-sensitive policies.

An interdisciplinary approach is applied, combining theories of migration, social integration, and human rights. The analysis uses a mixed methodology. In addition to reviewing policy documents and reports, qualitative interviews were conducted with young Roma individuals and civil sector representatives.

The work is structured as follows. The first chapter presents the theoretical framework and an overview of research on forced migration, adaptation, civic agency, and minority participation. The second chapter describes the research methodology, including the rationale for choosing methods, selecting respondents, and procedures for the field phase. The third chapter provides an empirical analysis of interviews with Ukrainian Roma youth in Germany and includes case studies revealing barriers and resources for adaptation. The fourth chapter analyzes youth activism as a tool for integration and identity transformation. It describes successful initiatives and digital activism. The fifth chapter correlates empirical data with theoretical approaches, providing a critical analysis of state and non-governmental policies and discussing the potential of youth activism to effect sustainable change. The conclusion summarizes the findings and formulates recommendations for policymakers, human rights organizations, and researchers.

CHAPTER 2 – Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Research on Forced Migration and Integration

Forced migration has become a key topic in contemporary social sciences, particularly due to the growing number of refugees resulting from military conflicts, persecution, and humanitarian crises. Classic migration studies, particularly the work of Castells and Miller (2020), emphasize that forced displacement differs from labor migration in both causes and adaptation trajectories. It is accompanied by high levels of stress, lack of choice, legal uncertainty, and limited access to resources.

A basic theoretical foundation for refugee adaptation is John Berry's (1997) concept of four models of acculturation: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization. Although developed in the context of ethnic minorities in stable conditions, it is also used to analyze migration, helping understand strategies chosen by forced migrants depending on host society structures and levels of discrimination.

The theory of segmented assimilation (Portes & Zhou, 1993) emphasizes heterogeneity in adaptation pathways. According to this theory, not all migrants follow the same trajectory: some integrate into the middle class, while others experience stagnation and marginalization, particularly under racial or ethnic discrimination.

Adaptation also involves a transnational dimension. Vertovec (2001) and Portes (1997) stress that migrants often maintain active ties with their homeland, participate in cross-border networks, and develop hybrid identities. This is particularly relevant for forced migrants who, despite being unable to return physically, continue identifying with their community of origin.

Legal status is a key factor in adaptation. The presence or absence of documents, access to guarantees, and legal protection directly influence integration. Studies by the UNHCR (2023) and Human Rights Watch (2022) show that even with formal protection, refugees often experience “secondary exclusion” when legal guarantees are not matched by real access to services.

From a policy perspective, EU studies (European Commission, 2020; FRA, 2023) show that universal programs rarely address the cultural and social specifics of vulnerable groups. As a result, Roma, undocumented individuals, and people without formal education often remain excluded.

Thus, research on forced migration highlights its multidimensional nature and the importance of considering both structural factors — such as laws, the labor market, and education systems — and individual strategies of survival and resistance. This is especially relevant in the case of Ukrainian Roma, whose adaptation is hindered by intersecting vulnerabilities.

Specific Features of the Social Adaptation of Vulnerable Groups

The social adaptation of vulnerable groups in the context of forced migration differs in both the scale of the challenges they face and the depth of their interaction. For groups such as ethnic minorities, undocumented individuals, and members of impoverished communities, migration means more than just relocation; it signifies a radical change in their entire way of life. According to research by Castles and Miller (2020), the adaptation of vulnerable migrants often occurs in an environment of institutional alienation. In this environment, access to education, healthcare, and housing is limited not only formally, but also in practice due to bureaucracy, discrimination, and a failure to consider cultural specificities.

The literature pays particular attention to how social insecurity prior to migration affects its consequences. If a person was already experiencing systemic marginalization (e.g., poverty, discrimination, or a lack of education) prior to the war, migration exacerbates this vulnerability. Roma from Ukraine, for example, had extremely limited access to social resources before the war (IOM, 2021). Moving to Germany, despite formal guarantees of protection, does not eliminate these problems but rather transfers them to a new context.

An important element of adaptation for vulnerable groups is having an unequal start in the legal field. According to research by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and Human Rights Watch (HRW) (2023), refugees without documents, with low literacy levels, or facing language barriers are less likely to have access to legal aid and protection mechanisms. The process of obtaining temporary protection status can also be retraumatizing, especially if it is accompanied by misunderstandings, delays, discrimination, or uncertainty. Ukrainian Roma are particularly vulnerable in this context because they often lack documents proving their identity or citizenship and do not understand their rights.

In everyday adaptation practices, the "invisible work" of women plays a critical role. Migration studies emphasize that women are often the first to take on childcare, interact with social services, search for housing, and apply for benefits. At the same time, they are more likely to face double discrimination on the basis of both ethnicity and gender (Roma Education Fund, 2023). In Ukrainian Roma families who have moved to Germany, women often become leading figures in the integration process. They learn the language, participate in initiatives, accompany their children to school, and become mediators between the community and the state.

Cultural misunderstandings hinder adaptation as well. Host institutions are rarely adapted to alternative models of family life, social organization, and trust. For instance, German schools emphasize individual interaction with children and parents, whereas Roma families make

decisions collectively with the participation of elders. This can lead to conflicts of expectations, misunderstandings on the part of social workers, and feelings of humiliation or alienation among Roma.

Ultimately, adapting vulnerable migrants is impossible without considering psychosocial factors. Stress, loss of home, constant temporariness, and experiences of discrimination can create chronic insecurity and depression in refugees. Research by the IOM (2023) highlights that vulnerable groups are more likely to exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress, particularly when lacking access to adequate psychological support. In this context, religiosity, cultural rituals, community support, and self-organization are essential resources for survival, not just forms of "tradition".

Thus, the adaptation of vulnerable migrants is not a linear process but rather a complex interplay of structural barriers, cultural differences, and psychological experiences. Understanding these characteristics is necessary for analyzing the case of Ukrainian Roma in Germany.

Participation of Roma Youth in Public Life

The participation of Roma youth in civic and public life is recognized as a key factor in strengthening their legal status, developing leadership skills, and promoting social cohesion. However, data indicate low levels of involvement; only about 21% of young Roma in Ukraine actively participate in civic initiatives. The rest face serious barriers: over half of those surveyed (55%) reported a lack of legal knowledge; 70% cited financial constraints; and 65% experienced prejudice and discrimination from society. These factors hinder their access to decision-making processes and participation in public affairs (TENET, 2024).

The low representation of young people in official structures means their voices are often unheard. According to survey data, 62% of young Roma believe that the opinions of young people are not sufficiently considered in decision-making processes, and 36% believe that strategic documents and policies rarely reflect their needs. This "institutional invisibility" means that the problems of Roma youth remain outside the scope of government programs. However, including them more actively in public life could improve their situation. International organizations emphasize this link. According to the Council of Europe's strategic guidelines, every generation has the right to a safe and inclusive society with equal access to rights and opportunities. For Roma youth, implementing this principle is especially important given the impact of structural racism and prejudice, which prevent them from realizing their potential.

Despite these challenges, an active Roma youth movement has emerged in Ukraine that operates at the local, national, and international levels. These organizations work in various fields, providing legal assistance, promoting education, developing media initiatives, and encouraging volunteering. Some initiatives are integrated into international projects or advocate abroad, forming transnational solidarity networks. Similar trends can be observed in other European countries. As part of Europe's largest minority, with around 12 million people, Roma youth have historically faced marginalization but have become increasingly active in recent years. The number of inter-ethnic initiatives is growing, including international Roma youth networks such as ternYpe (International Roma Youth Network) and Phiren Amenca, which bring together young activists from different countries to combat anti-Gypsyism and defend equal rights. Notably, nearly 200 Roma and pro-Roma organizations worldwide have jointly condemned the invasion of Ukraine, calling for respect of the human rights of all affected individuals. This demonstrates the increased cohesion of the Roma youth movement globally.

The international community is taking steps to support the participation of Roma youth in society. In 2023, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe adopted Recommendation CM/Rec(2023)4. This recommendation calls on the 46 member states to ensure the effective participation and representation of Roma youth in all areas of public and political life and to combat structural racism. Building on previous initiatives, such as the Strasbourg Declaration on Roma (2010) and the Roma Youth Action Plan (2011), this recommendation is an important step forward and aligns with the Council of Europe's Strategic Framework for the Integration of Roma and Travellers (2020–2025), which identifies youth participation as a priority.

Additionally, the Council of Europe's Youth Sector Strategy through 2030 focuses on increasing youth participation and ensuring access to rights for vulnerable groups. The 2024 TENET study explicitly states that the strategic guidelines of the European Youth Strategy and the latest recommendations on the involvement of Roma youth were considered when analyzing the situation in Ukraine. At the European Union level, the EU Strategic Framework on Roma Equality, Inclusion, and Participation (2020–2030) emphasizes supporting young Roma and encouraging their participation in public life. Thus, a broad international framework is in place to overcome the historical marginalization of Roma youth and promote their inclusion. However, the implementation of these recommendations largely depends on political will at the national level and the activism of young people themselves.

Forced Displacement and Invasion

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 triggered the largest migration crisis in Europe since World War II. Millions of Ukrainians, including a significant proportion of the Roma population, were forced to flee their homes. According to estimates by human rights defenders

and civil society organizations, around 100,000 Roma have left Ukraine to seek protection in other European countries. However, it is difficult to provide an exact figure because official statistics do not account for the ethnic origin of refugees. This reflects the problem of the "invisibility" of Roma in registration and assistance mechanisms. Nevertheless, according to 2023–2024 data, there were up to 50,000 Roma refugees in Poland (out of approximately one million Ukrainian refugees in the country), at least 3,000–4,000 in Hungary, and significant Roma communities also emerged in the Czech Republic, Romania, Slovakia, Germany, and Moldova. This wave of forced displacement has exposed additional layers of vulnerability. As the International Institute for Migration Policy noted, "Not every displaced Ukrainian was welcomed equally", and for many Roma, fleeing the war was accompanied by new barriers of exclusion and discrimination.

Within Ukraine itself, the war has exacerbated existing inequalities. Roma youth have been particularly hard hit; the fighting has deprived many of them of access to basic rights and services, such as education, housing, healthcare, and employment. In the context of hostilities and mass displacement, 45 percent of young Roma surveyed in a quantitative questionnaire conducted as part of this research reported being forced to interrupt their education or lose the opportunity to attend school due to evacuation or immediate danger. Another 38 percent indicated limited access to informal (out-of-school) education during the war. These educational setbacks create serious obstacles to the further development and social adaptation of young people. In addition, the economic stability of families has been undermined. Many Roma communities have lost their homes and sources of income, which has further exacerbated their already difficult socioeconomic conditions. According to the same survey and interviews with representatives of youth organizations, access to services—from medical care to information—has worsened significantly during the conflict, especially for those who have relocated within Ukraine or abroad.

The war has also negatively impacted the Roma community's access to rights and security. Even before 2022, around 10–20% of Ukrainian Roma lacked identity documents or citizenship. With the start of the mass exodus, this problem became more acute. According to the UN, around 30,000 Roma in Ukraine lacked official identity documents prior to the war, meaning many families encountered difficulties crossing the border and registering as refugees. Their citizenship was difficult to prove, so some Roma refugees did not receive temporary protection status in the EU. Therefore, they did not have access to associated rights and services. Cases of ethnic profiling were reported at the borders: Roma women, children, and the elderly were subjected to additional checks and were sometimes denied transportation and lodging, while other categories of refugees were given priority. Such discrimination continued at reception centers. According to both human rights organizations and testimonies collected during this research, Roma were housed separately from others or received poorer-quality assistance in a number of reception centers in Europe. In Hungary and the Czech Republic, for example, Roma refugees were placed in overcrowded makeshift camps, while other Ukrainians were sent to families or comfortable hostels. This treatment undermined their sense of security. Isolated and cramped, young Roma refugees often felt unwanted and vulnerable (Interview 6, Roma youth, Berlin, 2025)

Even when they took advantage of the European Union's temporary protection program, which legally grants Ukrainian refugees access to housing, education, healthcare, and the labor market, Roma youth were often excluded from these opportunities. Often, they had to settle for temporary shelters and collective centers because poverty and everyday racism prevented them from entering the rental market. Landlords refused to rent to Roma out of fear of stereotypes, and the families often lacked the means to pay for housing. According to research, Roma refugees have almost no access to private housing in Central and Eastern Europe and remain in state or charitable shelters for extended periods. These facilities are often overcrowded and

not designed for long-term stays. However, there are no alternatives, so Roma find themselves segregated in institutional settings. They are gradually being pushed out as emergency assistance measures are phased out. Employment issues are closely related to housing and are also marked by vulnerability. Although beneficiaries of temporary protection have the legal right to work, many Roma migrants have access only to informal and low-paid jobs, which are often exploitative. This perpetuates their economic instability and dependence on one-time benefits and volunteer assistance. Unfortunately, such difficulties are not isolated exceptions solely linked to the war. Experts note that these issues are part of long-standing patterns of discrimination against Roma, effectively reproducing entrenched marginalization.

The situation was particularly dire in the first months of the war on Ukraine's western borders. For instance, in Poland — the country that took in the largest number of Ukrainian refugees — Roma families were sometimes unable to receive benefits or medical care due to a lack of documents and prejudice on the part of local authorities. Despair drove some people to return to war-torn Ukraine. According to media reports, some Roma refugees chose to leave Hungary and return home because they were denied humanitarian aid and discriminated against in Europe. These cases demonstrate the severity of unequal treatment. Young Roma, facing the dual challenges of military risks and systemic discrimination, have essentially become double refugees, fighting for both their physical survival and recognition of their right to equal protection. Overall, the war has resulted in the loss of familiar environments (schools, homes, and communities), increased poverty, and a new wave of stigmatization for Roma youth that has spread beyond Ukraine. This situation underscores the fact that, in times of crisis, ensuring formal equality of rights is insufficient; special measures that address the vulnerability of minorities are necessary to ensure that "no one is left behind" in humanitarian responses.

Stigmatization, Invisibility, and Vulnerability

Roma youth are at the intersection of multiple systemic problems described in theory as stigmatization, institutional invisibility, and vulnerability. These phenomena are closely interlinked and reinforce each other, creating a vicious cycle of exclusion. Stigmatization refers to the negative perception and labeling of Roma in society. Historically entrenched anti-Gypsyism means that young Roma are often perceived through the lens of stereotypes. For instance, a study of Ukrainian Roma youth revealed that 40% of respondents cited societal prejudice as a significant barrier to their development. Structural racism and social prejudices lower the self-esteem of young Roma, hinder their participation in public life, and undermine their trust in institutions. The burden of stigma is especially heavy for vulnerable subgroups within the Roma community, including young women and girls, Muslims within the Roma community, and residents of isolated rural areas. They experience intersecting forms of discrimination, facing not only ethnic bias, but also sexism, homophobia, and religious intolerance. The Council of Europe's new recommendation on the participation of Roma youth emphasizes the importance of considering the diversity of Roma communities in policies and programs, addressing these intersections, particularly the issues faced by Roma girls, women, and Muslims. Without overcoming stigmatization, full integration is difficult to achieve. As experts note, structural racism directly undermines Roma youth participation in all areas, including school, employment, and representation in NGOs and politics.

The institutional invisibility of Roma youth is evident in official structures' frequent failure to recognize and address their specific needs. In several European countries, such as Spain and France, ethnic statistics are not collected for legislative or political reasons. This hidden exclusion itself becomes a form of discrimination. A similar situation has developed with Ukrainian refugees: no EU country includes a category for "Roma" in its arrival records from

Ukraine. The lack of data hinders the development of targeted assistance programs and allows authorities to ignore the scale of problems this group faces. Invisibility within the system also means that Roma youth are poorly represented in decision-making processes. As previously mentioned, over a third of young Roma in Ukraine believe that neither national nor local youth development strategies reflect their needs. This sentiment is common among Roma youth in other countries as well, where they are rarely invited to participate in dialogues about youth policy or integration plans. The mistrust is mutual: Young Roma often do not seek support from official structures because they believe these structures lack the competence or desire to help them. This reinforces their marginalization, as their problems remain "invisible" in reports and strategies. Overcoming institutional invisibility requires political recognition of the problem itself. The Council of Europe insists on this, calling on states to collect data on the situation of Roma youth and include their representatives in consultative bodies.

The consequences of stigma and invisibility are the increased vulnerability of Roma youth. This refers to a combination of factors that make them more susceptible to rights violations, poverty, and violence. Even before the war, most young Roma in Ukraine and other countries in the region lived in conditions of social deprivation. For example, it is estimated that only 38% of Roma of working age were employed formally before 2022, and the secondary education completion rate among Roma youth was significantly lower than the national average. Girls from Roma communities often married and became mothers as teenagers, limiting their educational and career prospects. These vulnerabilities are exacerbated by external stresses, such as military conflict or economic crisis. During the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Roma were among the most vulnerable groups. Low levels of education and a lack of documentation made it difficult for them to access information about evacuations and assistance. Previous experiences with discrimination meant that many were afraid to turn to the authorities, even in an emergency. The OSCE ODIHR Monitoring Report on Ukraine (2023)

found that the rights of young Roma are violated in many areas, including education, healthcare, freedom of movement, and freedom of expression. These are not anomalies of an emergency period but manifestations of long-standing exclusion, reproduced in new conditions. Recognizing this vulnerability has led to an understanding that special support measures are needed. For example, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has issued a separate briefing on Roma refugees, calling on governments to consider their needs in their response to the crisis.

To break the cycle of stigma, invisibility, and vulnerability, experts and activists emphasize the importance of non-formal education and youth work. The TENET study shows that non-formal education is a key factor in encouraging civic engagement among Roma youth. Through training, youth exchanges, volunteer projects, and mentoring, young people gain knowledge and skills lacking in the formal system. Legal literacy, familiarity with methods of public participation, advocacy, monitoring, and the ability to interact with government agencies are essential elements of these educational programs. Developing communication and leadership skills is also a priority — many young Roma are talented and have great ideas, but they need support to transform them into meaningful social projects. An important feature of these programs is a dual strategy, or double mainstreaming. On the one hand, it creates special educational opportunities for Roma youth to help them catch up, overcome barriers, and feel confident in a safe environment. On the other hand, it integrates them into the general youth context to avoid isolation. In practice, this means there must be separate training courses for Roma participants and inclusive activities with their peers. Special attention should be given to language barriers. It is recommended that information and training be provided in a language understandable to Roma, ideally in their native Romani alongside the official language, and that learning English be encouraged, as it opens access to international opportunities.

At the international level, a number of strategic documents enshrine the importance of non-formal education and youth exchange. The aforementioned Recommendation CM/Rec(2023)4 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe contains a detailed list of measures aimed at strengthening the involvement of Roma youth. In particular, states are invited to take the following steps:

- **Education and mobility:** Provide targeted funding and support for Roma youth to access non-formal education, youth work programs, and international exchanges through affirmative action (quotas and scholarships) and community outreach.
- **Anti-discrimination programs:** Support educational projects and training that raise awareness of structural racism and anti-Gypsyism, promote learning about Roma history and culture, and strengthen ethnic identity.
- **Youth centers:** Create and fund youth centers and cultural spaces, especially near areas with compact Roma populations, to provide safe environments for learning and self-expression.
- **Training:** Establish certification and mentoring programs that enable young Roma to become youth workers, mentors, and trainers, building a peer-to-peer learning model.
- **Linguistic accessibility:** Provide materials in Romani, conduct campaigns in Roma communities, and remove language barriers to ensure equal participation in national and international programs.
- **Partnerships and inclusion:** Support projects between Roma youth organizations and mainstream youth NGOs or councils, encouraging joint activities to dismantle stereotypes.
- **Intercultural dialogue:** Promote joint youth events and international initiatives to build alliances against racism and xenophobia.

The implementation of these measures has already begun with the support of Council of Europe institutions and other partners. The European Youth Foundation (EYF) launched a program for Ukraine to strengthen the participation of Roma youth. As part of it, the EYF held training courses on advocacy for young Roma activists from 2023 to 2024. Afterward, the activists implemented information campaigns in their communities. The TENET research initiative, on which this analysis is based, was part of the *Building Resilience: Roma Youth Movement Initiative* project, supported by the EYF. The project helped create a network of young Roma experts who share research findings with government agencies, NGOs, and international institutions. One priority in the TENET recommendations is coordination with international organizations to secure resources for Roma youth groups and ensure their participation in training and exchange programs.

This approach helps Roma youth integrate into the global youth space, learn best practices, and raise awareness of their issues. In addition to traditional education, digital activism and networking are important. During the war and pandemic, much of public life moved online, and Roma youth have used this platform for consolidation and self-defense. According to research, young Ukrainians abroad are more active online: 42% initiated petitions, 41% engaged in digital civic activities, and 38% created and shared socially significant content. Digital tools have become a lifeline. Activists used social media to organize aid, share evacuation information, and report discrimination. Innovative projects combining history and technology have also emerged. For instance, the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture (ERIAC) launched a digital archive of oral histories of Roma refugees from Ukraine. This archive preserves memories of war, survival, and resistance through Roma voices, combating the stereotype of passive victimhood.

In Germany, one of the main destinations for Ukrainian refugees, implementing these approaches is crucial. There is a long-standing network of Roma and Sinti organizations supporting arrivals. The Central Council of German Sinti and Roma launched a hotline for Roma refugees, offering help with accommodation, paperwork, and healthcare in Romani. In partnership with government and charities, schools created spaces for Roma youth to continue their education. Roma youth activists, both local and displaced, organize information sessions and cultural events to counter stereotypes and build bridges with the host society. These efforts form a transnational network of mutual aid, uniting the expertise of Western European Roma organizations with the energy of Ukrainian Roma activists. Many projects are now implemented online, connecting participants across cities and countries.

Finally, international strategies and policies provide a framework for these initiatives. The Council of Europe's Youth Strategy to 2030 prioritizes access to rights and inclusive societies. These principles are directly relevant to Roma youth, whose rights remain incomplete. Recommendation CM/Rec(2023)4 calls for the representation of young Roma in all structures, from school councils to government advisory bodies, and urges action against anti-Gypsyism. Implementing these guidelines requires national reforms: anti-discrimination standards in education and employment, Roma mediators in schools, and financial support for Roma NGOs. The Council of Europe's Strategic Framework for Roma and Travellers (2020–2025) emphasizes youth empowerment. The EU Council's 2021 recommendation on Roma equality, inclusion, and participation urges attention to youth, including preventing school segregation, easing school-to-work transition, and encouraging civic engagement. Civil society organizations such as ERRC and the ERGO Network monitor the situation and offer recommendations considered at national and international levels.

Taken together, these efforts represent a complex set of opportunities and challenges. Roma youth from Ukraine now experiencing displacement face new possibilities: joining activist networks, accessing education, and building careers. Some have become school mediators, others intern in youth councils or lead volunteer projects. Yet long-standing problems—stigma, poverty, mistrust—persist. Research emphasizes that general youth programs are not enough; a holistic approach based on Roma participation is needed. International frameworks offer direction, but real change comes through grassroots activism and support for youth-led initiatives. Strengthening Roma youth organizations is critical so that communities can protect and develop themselves even in times of crisis.

CHAPTER 3 – Methodology

Research Design

This study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the social adaptation and civic engagement processes of Ukrainian Roma youth in Germany within the context of forced migration. To achieve this goal, a primarily qualitative research design was employed, combining elements of field research, case studies, and narrative analysis. Additionally, a small-scale quantitative survey was conducted to support and triangulate the qualitative findings. This mixed approach enables the recording of social facts and a deeper understanding of how the Roma interpret their experiences with resettlement, discrimination, belonging, and activism.

Methodologically, the work is based on grounded theory logic, in which theoretical generalizations are derived from the analysis of interviews and observations rather than from pre-established hypotheses. This interpretive study seeks to capture the internal logic of everyday life, languages of resistance, and survival strategies developed under conditions of legal and social uncertainty.

The focus on young people is determined by both age criteria and the political significance of this group. Young Roma are at the intersection of several axes of vulnerability—ethnic, migratory, age, and legal—yet they demonstrate the greatest potential for social mobilization, mastering new technologies and building transnational ties. This study focuses on Ukrainian Roma between the ages of 18 and 35 who have lived in Germany since 2022, regardless of their legal status.

The study is based on a multi-level analysis covering:

1. individual narratives: experiences of adaptation, discrimination, migration paths, perceptions of institutions, and activism;
2. the institutional environment: attitudes of schools, migration authorities, social services, and NGOs toward Roma migrants;
3. public initiatives and media: platforms for representation, mobilization, and political participation.

The study's design is not simply aimed at collecting information, but at reconstructing subjective experiences, searching for new forms of agency, and exposing structural inequalities behind formal "integration" rhetoric. While not representative, the research seeks depth and contextual understanding of life on the edge of inclusion and exclusion.

Data Collection Methods

Qualitative interviews and case studies

The qualitative semi-structured interview is the primary method of obtaining empirical material. These interviews revealed the subjective assessments, feelings, strategies, and personal trajectories of Ukrainian Roma in Germany. This approach is particularly important for vulnerable and under-researched groups whose everyday lives are often overlooked in quantitative surveys and statistics.

A total of 12 in-depth interviews were conducted:

- 8 with young Roma (including students, activists, parents, unemployed and informally employed persons);
- 3 with representatives of NGOs and humanitarian organizations;
- 1 with a Roma leader active in public and media politics.

Depending on the respondent's preference, interviews were conducted in Russian, Ukrainian, English, Romani, or German. Translation and clarification were used in some cases to minimize misunderstandings. Most interviews were conducted online via Zoom or WhatsApp, with some in-person meetings in Berlin, Potsdam, and Nordheim during the field phase.

Interviews included the following thematic blocks:

- **Migration history:** reasons for leaving Ukraine, route, resettlement conditions;
- **First experiences in Germany:** housing, registration, relations with local services;
- **Adaptation:** language, education, work, discrimination;
- **Identity:** self-perception, community, interaction with other Roma;
- **Activism:** participation in initiative groups, motivation, challenges, successes.

Institutional cases were also analyzed, including:

- Access to education (segregation vs. inclusion),
- Housing and registration barriers,
- Experience with language courses and discrimination.

These cases help detail institutional dynamics and demonstrate how mechanisms function differently across regions and circumstances.

Method choice was driven by both practical access and the author's values: giving voice to participants and recording their explanatory models in context. This is crucial for Roma communities, whose trajectories are too often interpreted externally or through deficit-based narratives.

Quantitative Survey Component

In addition to qualitative methods, the study also incorporated a small-scale quantitative component to support and triangulate the findings. A structured questionnaire was designed and distributed via Google Forms in May 2025. The survey targeted Ukrainian Roma youth aged 18–35 who had experienced displacement since 2022 and were residing either in Germany or other European countries.

A total of 44 valid responses were collected. The questionnaire included both multiple-choice and open-ended questions on access to education, employment, housing, healthcare, documentation, and civic participation.

While not representative, the quantitative data provided additional insight into general patterns of exclusion and adaptation. It also served to identify key areas of concern, which were further explored during in-depth interviews.

Description of the Sample and Interview Procedure

Description of the Sample and Interview Procedure

The sample was selected using targeted and snowball methods, appropriate for studying a vulnerable group with limited public visibility. Inclusion criteria: self-identification as Roma, displacement from Ukraine after 2022, and physical presence in Germany for at least three months at the time of the interview.

The sample included 12 respondents across three groups:

- **Group 1: Young Ukrainian Roma (8 people)**
 - Age: 18–33
 - Gender: 4 women, 4 men
 - Regions: Kherson, Odessa, Zakarpattia, Kharkiv
 - Status: Students, single mothers, unemployed, activists
 - Experiences: from camps to youth forums
- **Group 2: NGO and human rights representatives (3 people)**
 - Coordinators and social workers in Berlin, Bavaria, Brandenburg
 - One respondent from the National Center for Documentation of Discrimination Against Roma
- **Group 3: One community leader**
 - A man in his thirties forming local self-help groups and collaborating with German NGOs

Interviews were conducted in May 2025, lasting from 35 to 90 minutes. Participants received an information sheet explaining the study's aims, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Consent was provided either verbally or in writing, and anonymous citation permissions were obtained when necessary.

The semi-structured format allowed for varying disclosure levels depending on the sensitivity of topics. In emotionally difficult moments, respondents could pause or stop the interview.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and manually coded using a thematic approach. Codes included: "discrimination", "institutional trust/distrust", "language barrier", "mutual aid", "youth role", "cultural identity", among others. This method allowed not only recording of individual stories, but identification of structural patterns relevant to migration and transformation contexts.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

This research adhered to the ethical standards of Central European University (CEU) and the European Association of Social Scientists (EASSH). Approval was granted by the CEU DPP Ethics Committee.

Confidentiality and anonymity

Participants were informed of their rights: to skip questions, end interviews, and request data deletion. Names and identifiers were removed. Geographic and social markers were adjusted where necessary.

Verbal consent

In some cases, written consent was not feasible due to digital or language limitations. In these cases, verbal consent was recorded after an explanation of research goals in an understandable language.

Emotional impact

Some interviews touched on war, evacuation, or trauma and caused emotional reactions. Participants could pause or stop. One respondent requested psychological support and was referred to a refugee assistance provider.

Limitations

This study does not aim to be statistically representative. The sample is limited to urban areas in western and eastern Germany and includes primarily individuals connected to NGOs and support networks.

As a result, some groups remain underrepresented, particularly those residing in isolated camps or lacking institutional contact. Limited access to certain closed facilities and partial language barriers also shaped the research process. Additionally, interviews with activists may include elements of strategic or socially desirable responses.

Despite these limitations, the study provides a valuable and nuanced perspective on the adaptation experiences and civic agency of Ukrainian Roma youth in Germany. These reflections emphasize the need for continued research, especially among the most marginalized and underrepresented Roma communities.

CHAPTER 4 – Social Adaptation of Ukrainian Roma in Germany

Forced Migration and Language Barriers

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Germany emerged as a major destination for displaced persons, including a significant number of Roma. While more than 1.1 million Ukrainian refugees were officially registered in Germany (UNHCR, 2023), estimates by the European Roma Rights Center suggest that between 20,000 and 30,000 Roma may be among them. However, the lack of ethnic identification in official statistics hinders an accurate assessment of their numbers and needs. This invisibility further complicates efforts to address the specific vulnerabilities faced by Roma in displacement and integration contexts.

Even before the war, a significant portion of the Roma population in Ukraine lacked identity documents. According to the UNHCR (2021), approximately 30,000 of the 400,000 Ukrainian Roma did not have passports or birth certificates. This severely hindered evacuation, border crossing, and access to legal and humanitarian assistance. Cases of discriminatory treatment were reported at borders and in reception centers, where Roma families were denied accommodation based on prejudiced beliefs about "abuse of social support". In Prague, for example, local authorities publicly refused to accept Ukrainian Roma in spring 2022, instead sending them to Germany.

The journey through several countries was often traumatic. Some respondents recalled spending two weeks without shelter at the Travemünde port before being offered a spot in a reception center. Many reported that their initial experience in Germany was marked by disorientation, bureaucratic difficulties, and a complete lack of language support. In these conditions, language barriers emerged as a key obstacle to adaptation and access to rights.

Young Roma from rural or marginalized communities were often unprepared for the bureaucratic and linguistic demands of the new system. Many had incomplete or fragmented education. According to a study by the Roma Education Fund (2023), around 35% of Roma youth in Ukraine had not completed secondary education, and some had not finished primary school. This compounded the problem: not only were they unfamiliar with German, but also struggled with official Ukrainian or Russian. As a result, they were unable to independently complete paperwork or contact social services, schools, or medical institutions.

The Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) offers integration courses, but they are rarely tailored to the needs of undereducated refugees. The educational characteristics of Roma participants are often not considered, which reduces their motivation and limits course effectiveness. As Berntsen et al. (2021) argue, a lack of flexible, culturally sensitive formats reinforces marginalization and reduces integration outcomes.

In response, some German civil society organizations have launched initiatives aimed at Roma refugees. In summer 2022, the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma, with support from the Jewish community, created a hotline offering consultations in Romani, Ukrainian, and Russian. It became the first accessible communication channel for many new arrivals. Romani Rose, head of the Council, stressed that anti-Gypsyism remains a structural problem exacerbating Roma isolation even amid a general humanitarian crisis.

Nonetheless, language isolation remains persistent. Many participants noted that, even after completing basic courses, they lacked confidence in daily interactions — at doctor appointments, job centers, or in schools. The language barrier is deeply interwoven with educational, social, and institutional exclusion, reinforcing a cycle of limited opportunities. As Portes and Zhou (1993) point out, vulnerability factors accumulate and shape the adaptation trajectories of minorities differently from mainstream migration experiences.

For Ukrainian Roma in Germany, this means that adaptation requires a comprehensive approach — one that accounts for cultural background, basic literacy, access to mediation, and long-term support readiness. Without such an approach, even well-meaning political commitments to equality risk leaving Roma youth formally present, but practically excluded from social and educational systems.

Discrimination and Access to Education and Housing

Even after reaching safety in Germany, Ukrainian Roma continue to face persistent structural discrimination that limits their access to basic social rights, particularly education and housing. Despite the existence of a formally equal legal framework provided by European Union directives and German legislation, the situation of Roma youth remains marginalized in practice. This is due not only to the difficulties associated with forced migration, but also to deeply rooted institutional practices of mistrust, stereotyping, and cultural insensitivity.

Education: Segregation Under the Guise of Integration

Access to education is a key element of social integration, yet Roma youth face systemic barriers in this area. According to the Roma Education Fund (2023), many Roma adolescents arriving in Germany waited a long time to be included in the education system or were placed in transitional "Willkommensklassen" (welcome classes) without being integrated into mainstream education. In several cases documented in this study, Roma children were not registered in schools for months due to issues such as incomplete documentation or unproven residence — obstacles that did not prevent other Ukrainian refugees from enrolling.

Beyond administrative delays, the lack of adapted language and pedagogical support is a significant barrier. Many young Roma have limited educational experience and require

specialized programs. Yet most schools lack the tools and resources to meet these needs. As a result, some students struggle with the curriculum, experience isolation, or are targeted by bullying. One respondent from Odesa, recalled: “At the Czech school, almost no one talked to me, even though they communicated normally with other Ukrainians”. This illustrates how ethnic identity can lead to exclusion, even in settings that appear inclusive.

As Berntsen et al. (2021) emphasize, successful integration requires recognition of students’ varied starting points and flexibility in pedagogy. Without individualized approaches, Roma students are de facto segregated, which reduces motivation and increases dropout risk. Since access to education is closely linked to participation in the labor market, these failures perpetuate poverty and exclusion.

Housing: A Double Barrier of Poverty and Ethnic Discrimination

Access to decent and stable housing is another critical condition for successful adaptation. While all refugees are initially placed in reception centers, subsequent resettlement depends on income, documentation, language skills, and, as field data show, ethnicity. According to the European Roma Rights Center (ERRC, 2023), Roma families remain in shelters longer and are less likely to move into private rentals than other refugees.

One key factor is discriminatory behavior by landlords. Participants reported being denied viewings after their accent revealed Roma origin. These refusals are seldom documented, but they reinforce what many describe as normalized exclusion. Even with sufficient resources, Roma families are often offered poor-quality or isolated housing, including remote apartments, overcrowded modules, or tent camps — as occurred in the Czech Republic and Poland in spring 2022.

Living conditions in shelters are often inadequate: overcrowding, lack of kitchens, unsanitary conditions, and limited privacy are common. One respondent described how his family left the Gießen camp without permission due to the poor conditions. In Schleswig-Holstein, they temporarily found relief — a supportive community, staff assistance, and part-time work at a laundry created a sense of stability. Yet their stay was short-lived, as they were relocated again to another region without consent, disrupting their fragile sense of security.

As Castles (2003) notes, “housing instability hinders other forms of participation”, including access to education and employment. Children in shelters have limited learning opportunities, and young people struggle to make future plans. Public narratives that portray Roma as “unwilling to integrate” often ignore the role of structural barriers and forced isolation.

Revival of Activism and Successful Adaptation

Despite the aforementioned challenges, the experiences of Ukrainian Roma refugees in Germany demonstrate successful adaptation and new opportunities for activism. Roma youth have shown flexibility and a desire to improve their lives by drawing on internal resources and support from civil society. This chapter examines effective strategies and how the crisis has given rise to new forms of Roma activism.

Community solidarity and mutual aid are key. One of the most powerful resources is support within the Roma community itself. When refugees are together, they cope more easily with stress and economic hardship. In the case of the Bosedt camp, being among “their own” improved the situation of Roma. There, a kind of home community emerged where people visited each other, shared food and information, and helped with childcare. Germany is home to a community of Sinti and Roma, many of whom are citizens and speak German. Their

organizations have supported newcomers from the beginning. Through the aforementioned hotline and local Roma associations, refugees receive advice, interpreters, and assistance in dealing with authorities. The informal network is also important: Roma families try to stay together and move in groups to places where they have relatives or friends. Their motto, “stick together”, has become a key to survival and adaptation in exile.

Activism and the voice of youth

The challenges of war have given rise to new leaders among Roma youth. Many have realized that they must fight for their rights and make their voices heard. Before the war, the Roma youth movement in Ukraine was gaining momentum. Now, its energy has partly shifted to the diaspora. Young activists are building connections with international organizations, attending conferences, and raising awareness about Roma refugee issues. European institutions have become more open to their participation. In 2023, the Council of Europe issued recommendations calling for Roma youth to be included in decision-making. Representatives of the Roma Youth Development Platform are preparing a youth-friendly version of these recommendations for broader dissemination. Germany, for its part, introduced the position of Special Commissioner for the Life of Sinti and Roma, offering Roma activists a formal channel to influence integration policy.

However, young people need knowledge and skills to use these opportunities. According to the TENET study, major barriers to participation include a lack of leadership skills, legal literacy, and structural support. The activists themselves recognize this. As one young Roma woman shared: “I lack knowledge in many areas, so informal education is essential”. Another added: “The biggest problem is funding. Activists need money, help, and support—both financial and media”. These statements point to a clear need: educational programs, training, and internships are crucial to building effective Roma leadership. For example, the *Building Resilience: Roma*

Youth Movement Initiative, implemented by TENET and supported by the European Youth Foundation, provided such capacity-building through training, research, and strategic sessions that enabled young Roma to create collective responses to the crisis.

There are stories of successful integration

While it is too early to speak of large-scale success, individual examples give hope. A family from Kharkiv, after months of hardship, eventually found stability: they rented housing, received social assistance, and began to rebuild their lives. A young man in the family explained that with a scholarship and benefits, they cover half the rent — modest but sufficient. Another story involves a young Roma man from Kyiv who, after traveling through several countries, continued his Ukrainian education online from Norway, refusing to fall behind. In this case, support from local volunteers, including migrants from other backgrounds, played a key role. These stories demonstrate that Roma youth can adapt and thrive if given a real chance.

The role of civil society is essential

Roma and pro-Roma organizations across Europe united to support displaced Ukrainians. When state systems faltered, activists stepped in. They provided legal aid, shelter, and basic assistance. In Germany, the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma coordinated Roma-focused aid, promoted access to temporary protection, and documented discrimination cases. This volunteer activism became a new form of the Roma movement. For many youth, it was a formative experience in solidarity and rights defense. Though resources are limited, the impact has been real. Public pressure and media coverage of Roma discrimination in places like the Czech Republic and Hungary pushed governments to respond. In Germany, NGO monitoring helped prevent rights violations and offered critical insights for future policies.

The revival of activism plays a special role

Young Roma who have experienced war and displacement now bring unique perspectives and motivation to create change. Their lived experiences with injustice inspire action. Some were driven to activism after facing discrimination abroad; others are determined to create better futures for their children. Public awareness of Roma contributions is growing. Roma participation in humanitarian and volunteer work during the war is increasingly recognized. In Germany, Roma activists take part in genocide memorial events and protests against Russian aggression, stating: “We are victims of this war, and we are Europeans like everyone else”. These public statements empower Roma youth and shift public perception of the community.

The Kherson City Association of Young Roma (KYRS) has made a valuable contribution to the development of the transnational Roma youth movement. After relocating from Kherson to Odesa, KYRS continued its work with youth in Ukraine and abroad. In 2025, it implemented a training series for Ukrainian Roma youth in Germany. These sessions focused on preserving historical memory and preparing young Roma to become multipliers and future trainers. The program emphasized the Roma Holocaust, testimonial documentation, and modern approaches to memorialization within European civil society.

As a result, twenty certified young multipliers emerged, now representing the Roma community in European initiatives on genocide remembrance. KYRS’s efforts contribute to long-term youth activism and foster Roma participation in transnational memory and justice efforts.

These examples demonstrate how Roma youth are not only adapting to new conditions, but also actively shaping the landscape of civic engagement and historical remembrance in Germany. The role of youth-led initiatives and community solidarity is central to overcoming exclusion and building long-term strategies for inclusion.

CHAPTER 5 – Youth Activism and Access to Rights

Youth Activism for Integration and Identity Rebuilding

Forced resettlement due to war has created new challenges and opportunities for self-organization among young Ukrainian Roma in Germany. Confronted with language barriers, discrimination, and the loss of familiar surroundings, many are embracing activism as a means of integration and community empowerment. Through activism, they transition from passive "refugees" to active members of society who advocate for the rights and interests of their community. Roma youth organizations support newcomers by helping them learn the language, navigate bureaucratic procedures, and participate in educational projects that foster social connections. For example, the Berlin-based Roma youth association *Amaro Foro* was established in response to the migration waves of the 2010s. It opened an *Anlaufstelle* (help center) where young Roma received counseling in their native languages and engaged in local community service. These early experiences give Ukrainian Roma a sense of belonging and build their confidence as equal members of society.

Beyond practical support, youth activism plays a key role in community solidarity and the redefinition of ethnic identity. Forced migration has prompted many young Roma to reassess their place in society and explore their heritage with new interest. Activist spaces offer opportunities to discuss Roma culture, history, and language in a safe, supportive environment. *Amaro Foro* emphasizes the development of a “self-determined Roma identity” as essential for young people to take part in society with confidence and dignity. Through such spaces, Roma youth begin to view their identity not as a burden but as a source of pride and collective strength. Participation in pan-European initiatives, such as the annual *Dikh He Na Bister* campaign honoring Roma genocide victims, helps connect personal stories to broader Roma

history. These shared experiences foster solidarity with Roma across Europe and reinforce a commitment to defending community rights.

Youth activism has also become a pathway into political engagement and civic participation. Through their organizations, young Roma leaders in Germany establish relationships with institutions ranging from local city offices to international bodies. In Berlin, youth representatives work with municipal authorities to ensure Roma perspectives are included in policymaking. These efforts have produced results: city officials allocated a clubhouse and appointed a contact person for the youth organization, affirming their role as legitimate social actors. At the national level, Ukrainian Roma activists have joined advisory councils and participated in key consultations. In 2022, a group of Roma experts were invited to speak at the German Foreign Ministry, addressing issues such as education, legal protection, and support for displaced persons. Former refugees are becoming political agents—drafting appeals, engaging in dialogue, and collaborating with human rights defenders. This participation helps advance the interests of the Roma community and reinforces young activists’ sense of empowerment. In this way, activism functions as a catalyst for status transformation—from marginalized migrants to visible citizens with influence.

Moreover, youth activism is prompting a redefinition of Ukrainian Roma identity in diaspora. Young activists increasingly see themselves as operating across multiple dimensions: as Ukrainians who endured war, as Roma within Europe’s largest ethnic minority, and as migrants building lives in Germany. By organizing collective initiatives, they articulate a hybrid identity—"Ukrainian Roma activists"—that combines patriotism with ethnic consciousness. During the war, Roma activists have underscored their contributions to Ukraine’s defense and humanitarian relief, challenging persistent stereotypes. Through this public engagement, they reject the notion of being outsiders in either Ukraine or Germany. Instead, they present

themselves as bridges between cultures—agents of resilience, capable of enriching both societies through their experience and leadership.

Overall, youth activism has emerged as a universal tool for Ukrainian Roma in Germany. It serves as a path to integration, a platform for mutual support, a school of civic education, and a space for forging new identities rooted in both personal experience and shared memory. Through activism, Roma youth are reshaping not only their own lives but also the narratives surrounding their communities across Europe.

Examples of Successful Initiatives

Stimmen der Roma (Voices of the Roma) is a network of organizations representing the interests of the Roma community throughout Germany. The central organization in this network is the *Bundes Roma Verband* (Federal Roma Association), which refers to itself as the “United Voice of the Roma in Germany”. Headed by human rights activist Nizaeta Bislimi-Hocho, it has become one of the leading advocates for Ukrainian Roma at the federal level.

From the beginning of the war, *Stimmen der Roma* issued public statements demanding equal access to protection and assistance for Roma refugees. The union coordinated a joint appeal signed by dozens of Roma and pro-Roma organizations, highlighting cases of discrimination at borders and in accommodations, and urging authorities to act. The campaign attracted media and government attention, prompting federal and state authorities to pay closer attention to preventing refugee segregation. As a result, instructions for accommodation centers were updated to prohibit the separation of Roma families from other Ukrainian refugees.

Additionally, the *Bundes Roma Verband* launched a fundraising campaign with partner organizations, raising emergency funds for housing and basic necessities. The network also

established partnerships with international bodies such as the OSCE and the Council of Europe, bringing attention to the situation of Ukrainian Roma at international forums. In spring 2022, *Stimmen der Roma* activists participated in a special OSCE meeting where they shared testimonies and called for stronger rights monitoring.

The network's activities are supported by member organizations and German foundation grants. For instance, the EVZ Foundation funded Roma refugee support projects. Through partnerships with initiatives like the Roma women's platform *RomaniPhen* and the *Roma Antidiscrimination Network* (RAN), *Stimmen der Roma* has unified disparate efforts into a cohesive advocacy movement. This coordination has yielded concrete results: the German federal government now conducts regular consultations with Roma organizations, and issues of anti-Gypsyism and Roma inclusion are officially on the agenda at integration summits. *Stimmen der Roma* demonstrates that strategic and coordinated activism can result in real policy change and improved public recognition.

The *Roma Youth Network Germany* is the first nationwide network of Roma youth organizations in the country. It is built around *Amaro Drom e.V.*, founded in 2010 as a self-organized Roma youth federation. The network includes local groups such as *Amaro Foro* in Berlin, *Romano Sumnal* in Leipzig, and associations in Hamburg, Cologne, and beyond. *Amaro Drom* aims to create a space where Roma youth can develop their potential, share experiences, and unite in combating anti-Gypsyism.

Over the years, the network has achieved notable successes:

- **Educational and exchange programs:** Since 2011, an annual international youth exchange has brought together around 50 participants—both Roma and non-Roma—from different countries for creative workshops in music, theater, and strategic discussions on equality. Supported in part by the Council of Europe and Erasmus+,

these meetings have helped hundreds of Roma youth enhance their leadership and forge international networks.

- **Volunteer and social projects:** The network implements a range of social initiatives, from counseling Roma families on education and health to working in refugee camps. One of its key achievements is the establishment of *DOSTA*, the first anti-Gypsyism documentation center in Berlin, with *Amaro Drom*'s support. There, young volunteers gather evidence of discrimination against Roma migrants, forming the basis for awareness and educational campaigns.

What sets these initiatives apart is their adaptability and innovative approach. Unlike traditional service-based organizations, youth-led associations prioritize empowerment and self-representation. They give young Roma not just assistance but agency—tools to define problems and drive their own solutions. This shift from passive support to active engagement has proven to be a particularly effective strategy.

CHAPTER 6 – Discussion

Correlation with Theoretical Approaches

Analyzing the findings of this study requires a critical examination of prevailing theoretical models of migrant and minority adaptation. One foundational model is John Berry's acculturation theory, which outlines four strategies: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. According to Berry, integration leads to the most successful outcomes—assuming the host society is receptive. However, the experience of Ukrainian Roma youth reveals the limits of this model. In practice, even those who seek integration face systemic discrimination and anti-Gypsyism, which block their access to education, employment, housing, and healthcare.

Roma organizations in Germany consistently report that formally inclusive policies often fail to address structural racism. Integration becomes more rhetorical than real when the host environment remains unwelcoming. Moreover, Berry's model overlooks historical power dynamics. Roma communities in Europe have endured forced assimilation policies—from the suppression of nomadic lifestyles to child removals—which eroded trust in institutions without delivering inclusion. Thus, for Roma, acculturation has frequently meant the loss of identity without the gain of equal rights. Linear models that presume individual choice and neutrality of the host society do not adequately capture the Roma experience.

A more nuanced framework is Alejandro Portes's segmented assimilation theory, which emphasizes the influence of both origin and reception contexts. Portes argues that integration outcomes depend on the structure of available opportunities and societal attitudes. For Roma youth displaced by war, this theory is highly relevant: they arrive traumatized and then face

institutional racism in the host country. Without targeted support, they risk "downward assimilation"—not into the mainstream, but into the marginalized sectors of society.

Field data confirm this risk. Many Roma families remain in overcrowded shelters and struggle to access schooling or employment. Some prefer to stay in close-knit groups as a coping mechanism, drawing on internal networks for survival. This communal adaptation model is neither fully assimilationist nor separatist—it is better explained by the concept of translocality.

Translocality focuses on the social and spatial dynamics of maintaining ties across multiple locations. Roma families often circulate between Ukraine, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Germany, seeking opportunities and staying connected to extended networks. Young Roma participate in transnational digital communities, organize humanitarian assistance, and engage in cross-border solidarity. These practices challenge the binary logic of "home" and "host country" and reflect a strategy of survival that is simultaneously pragmatic and identity-affirming. Unlike traditional diasporas, however, Roma translocality is often involuntary—driven by exclusion from both origin and host societies. Still, it creates new spaces of belonging and agency.

Another relevant perspective is neo-assimilation theory, advanced by Richard Alba and Victor Nee. They argue that assimilation remains relevant but should be understood as a two-way process in which minority identities persist while the mainstream itself evolves. While promising in theory, this model has limited applicability to Roma experiences. Even highly assimilated groups such as German Sinti—citizens for generations—continue to face deep-seated prejudice. This illustrates that structural stigma can override formal inclusion. When the dominant group refuses to reconfigure its norms to include Roma, the promise of dual identity and equal belonging remains unfulfilled. Assimilation, in this context, is not a process of blending in, but a struggle for recognition in a system that resists change.

This leads to the concept of vulnerable citizenship. Legal status—citizenship or protection—does not necessarily ensure access to rights. Many Ukrainian Roma lacked identity documents and were excluded from refugee registration and social services. Even those with citizenship were treated with suspicion. In countries like the Czech Republic, Roma with dual Ukrainian-Hungarian citizenship were excluded from assistance altogether. This reflects a broader pattern seen across the EU: Roma who are nominally citizens often fall through the cracks of protection frameworks because they do not meet bureaucratic expectations of the “ideal” migrant.

The example of Romanian Roma in Sweden illustrates this further. As EU citizens, they have the right to move freely, but they are frequently homeless, excluded from services, and dependent on charity. Similarly, Ukrainian Roma in Germany, despite having legal temporary protection, face a level of vulnerability that other refugees do not. Their “precarious legal inclusion”—what some scholars call liminal legality—places them at constant risk of exclusion, even when their rights are formally recognized. They remain visible on paper, but invisible in practice.

Thus, none of the dominant models—Berry’s acculturation, Portes’s segmented assimilation, or Alba and Nee’s neo-assimilation—fully explain the complex, contradictory experiences of displaced Roma youth. What is needed is a synthesis of perspectives: the spatial and identity-based analysis of translocality, the structural critique embedded in vulnerable citizenship, and an understanding of activism not as an endpoint of integration, but as a survival strategy in contexts of persistent exclusion.

Roma youth in Germany are not passively assimilating; they are navigating fractured systems, contesting stigma, and creating new spaces of belonging. Their adaptation is not linear, but strategic and political. It is a process of claiming rights in an environment that often denies them—and that process cannot be captured by assimilation frameworks alone.

Critical Analysis of State and NGO Policies

The extent to which state strategies and NGO practices contribute to or hinder the social adaptation of Ukrainian Roma in Germany is shaped by systemic policy choices and institutional blind spots. Although Germany has included Roma in its broader National Strategy for Social Integration, it lacks a dedicated Roma integration program. Instead, it relies on general anti-discrimination and poverty reduction measures. While this “color-blind” approach may seem neutral in theory, in practice it often conceals an unwillingness to address the specific structural disadvantages Roma face.

Until recently, Germany did not officially recognize anti-Gypsyism as a structural issue, and no institutional mechanisms were established to guarantee equal access for Roma to education, housing, or employment. As a result, formally inclusive measures frequently failed to reach the most vulnerable. Roma organizations consistently report prejudice from landlords, employers, and institutional gatekeepers. Children often face difficulties in school due to lack of tailored support. Even though Germany officially recognizes Sinti and Roma as national minorities and condemns racism at the highest levels, these commitments are unevenly implemented on the ground. Moreover, the lack of ethnic data makes it difficult to monitor the impact of integration programs, further compounding Roma invisibility in the system.

The arrival of Roma refugees from Ukraine has exposed the limitations of this approach. While Germany’s response to the war—offering temporary protection and access to basic rights—was broadly inclusive, Roma arrivals often experienced suspicion and procedural delays. Some interviewees recalled being singled out at shelters or facing lengthy questioning while other Ukrainian families were processed quickly. These were not official policies but the result of

individual profiling and latent bias. Nonetheless, the outcome was the same: delayed aid and further marginalization.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), especially those led by Roma or with strong community ties, played a central role in filling these gaps. Groups like *Amaro Foro* and the *Central Council of German Sinti and Roma* mobilized quickly, offering interpretation services, distributing essentials, and pressuring the state to respond. Under their influence, authorities translated official documents into Romani, hired cultural mediators, and began mapping the needs of illiterate or undereducated Roma. These interventions were effective, but largely confined to specific localities. As a result, Roma youth support in Germany depended heavily on geographic chance: in cities with active NGOs, they received schooling assistance and legal guidance; elsewhere, families risked isolation. This patchwork approach reflects the absence of a unified national strategy.

A comparison with Poland underscores how similar “blind universalism” plays out under different conditions. Like Germany, Poland extended temporary protection to Ukrainian refugees but failed to address Roma-specific needs. Despite thousands of Roma arriving from Zakarpattia and other regions, Polish authorities treated them as part of the general influx—without recognizing the added barriers they faced. ERGO Network reports documented discrimination in shelters, with Roma families receiving substandard accommodations or being placed separately. In Warsaw, officials housed Roma in separate centers “to avoid scaring off volunteers”, and in one case, Roma were denied entry to a shelter because “someone had stolen something before”. These practices, though unofficial, were tolerated under the pretense of ethnic neutrality.

Again, NGOs and Roma activists bore the brunt of the response. While some organizations succeeded in supporting families, their resources were quickly exhausted. Volunteers faced

burnout, and in some cases, families returned to Ukraine, citing unbearable conditions in Poland. This can be seen as a failure of protection policy: when a refugee prefers returning to a war zone over remaining in a host country, the integration model has clearly collapsed.

The Czech Republic presents another instructive example. In spring 2022, hundreds of Roma refugees slept for weeks at Prague's main train station due to unclear legal status and a lack of accommodations. Authorities delayed assistance, claiming many were dual Hungarian-Ukrainian citizens ineligible for help. A segregated tent camp was eventually established, drawing criticism from human rights groups who labeled it a "ghetto". Roma families felt humiliated and abandoned. Some left the country entirely; others remained trapped in the same camp with little hope for integration.

In contrast, Austria offers examples of better practice. Longstanding recognition of the Roma as a national minority led to more responsive policies. Roma cultural centers and local NGOs helped refugees register, access housing, and receive basic social support. In Vienna and Salzburg, community-based mediation facilitated smoother transitions. Although Austria's national system also faced limitations, its infrastructure and political will to engage Roma actors enabled more effective responses.

Returning to Germany, targeted support has proven most effective when it is localized and co-created with Roma organizations. Programs that involved Roma youth in designing school preparation courses, translation, and legal assistance yielded promising results. However, these efforts remain isolated. National-level commitment to long-term, Roma-sensitive integration remains insufficient. A reliance on NGOs to compensate for institutional gaps is unsustainable. Volunteers cannot replace the responsibilities of the state.

The reluctance to acknowledge structural anti-Gypsyism undermines the goal of equality. Policies based on presumed sameness ignore deep-rooted inequalities. In some cases, calls for

special measures are rejected in the name of fairness, even when it is evident that the Roma face disproportionate challenges. This rhetorical equality perpetuates real inequality.

To move forward, a fundamental shift is needed—from denial to acknowledgment, from token consultation to shared governance. Roma youth must be involved not only as recipients of aid but as co-creators of solutions. Recognition of their specific vulnerabilities and agency is key. Integration policies that are blind to difference will continue to reproduce exclusion. Those that center on dialogue, trust, and tailored support offer a path toward genuine inclusion.

The Potential of Youth Activism

In the context of limited institutional support, the activism of Roma youth plays a vital role in both Germany and across Europe. This study demonstrates that young Ukrainian Roma are not passive recipients of policy decisions. On the contrary, they act as agents of change, using activism to assert their rights, gain political agency, and build grassroots infrastructure that often substitutes for absent state support.

First and foremost, youth participation enables the exercise of civic rights—freedom of association, cultural expression, and political engagement—guaranteed by international norms but rarely accessible in practice for marginalized groups. Through activism, young Roma transform formal rights into lived experiences. As several respondents noted, activism helped them “find their voice” and engage with institutions from a position of dignity rather than dependency. Even those without permanent status enacted what Hannah Arendt called the “right to have rights”—demanding recognition and inclusion by participating in public life. In Poland, for example, Roma youth initiated public campaigns and pressured authorities to end discriminatory treatment of Roma refugees. Organizations like the Toward Dialogue

Foundation advocated equal treatment and invoked human rights principles, exemplifying how youth activism can shape national discourse.

Second, activism provides political agency and builds capacity for long-term change. For a group historically excluded from political processes, this empowerment is transformative. Activists transition from seeking help to generating solutions. They develop public speaking, negotiation, and advocacy skills. The TENET report highlights that training in leadership, policy monitoring, and cooperation with authorities is key to strengthening Roma youth participation. Respondents shared examples of how they influenced local policy despite lacking formal status. In Poland, young Roma leaders secured meetings with officials and initiated staff trainings in refugee shelters, prompting involvement from the national Ombudsman. These experiences not only address immediate needs but also lay the groundwork for a future generation of Roma professionals—activists, social workers, and policymakers equipped to change systems from within.

Third, activism serves as a form of social infrastructure. In situations where official mechanisms fail, self-organized initiatives fill the gap. Roma youth networks across Europe have provided humanitarian aid, legal guidance, and language support to fellow refugees. These horizontal structures are crucial for community survival. Importantly, this activism challenges dominant stereotypes. By acting as organizers and providers—not merely recipients—young Roma shift perceptions and reject the victim narrative.

As one of the research participants noted: “I see the Roma youth movement as a strong network with its own voice”. Another respondent added: “In five years, I hope the image of modern Ukraine will include Roma in the national story”. These reflections illustrate the emergence of a new civic identity: Roma youth who see themselves as contributors to both the rebuilding of Ukraine and the future of European society.

This symbolic inclusion is essential. Just as other minorities in Western Europe reshaped public perception by producing visible leaders and role models, Roma youth are carving a similar path. Through platforms such as TernYpe and the ERGO Network, they are participating in European-level dialogue and policymaking. Their visibility contributes to shifting public narratives and fostering long-overdue recognition.

However, youth activism is not without its challenges. First, it often substitutes for institutional responsibilities, leading to burnout. As seen in Poland, volunteers working in crisis conditions without structural support quickly reach their limits. Second, young activists face internal resistance. Some respondents noted skepticism from elders in their communities, patriarchal attitudes, and dismissal of activism as “unproductive”. One young woman recalled: “My parents told me to stop wasting time and get a job”. It takes time and demonstrable impact to shift such attitudes—but change is underway. In communities where youth-led initiatives have helped with schooling or access to benefits, respect and trust have grown.

Third, activism needs resources. During 2022–2023, international institutions such as the Council of Europe and the European Youth Foundation offered crucial financial support for Roma youth affected by the war. These grants funded informal education, youth centers, exchanges, and mentoring programs. According to the *TENET* report, such investments have far-reaching effects: each empowered young leader can influence dozens of peers and prevent exclusion through peer support. Yet funding must go beyond temporary relief. Sustainable development of the Roma youth movement requires systemic support and inclusion in national strategies—not isolated pilot projects.

One promising development is the Council of Europe’s 2023 Recommendation on the Participation of Roma Youth, which urges states to actively involve young Roma in policymaking, remove barriers to participation, and support youth-led organizations.

Implementing this recommendation in Germany and other host countries will be a litmus test of political will. Moving from rhetorical commitments to concrete action is essential.

CHAPTER 7 – Conclusion

This study shows that Ukrainian Roma youth displaced to Germany due to Russia's full-scale invasion face a layered and persistent system of structural, institutional, and sociocultural barriers that significantly hinder their integration and social adaptation. At the same time, it identifies important forms of resilience, self-organization, and civic participation that challenge vulnerability and expand the agency of this marginalized group.

The empirical data confirm that many young Roma arrived in Germany already subjected to multiple marginalizations. Historical exclusion, lack of documentation, interrupted or absent access to education and healthcare, and cumulative experiences of discrimination—both in Ukraine and along migration routes—have deepened the trauma of displacement. Even in Germany's reception system, some respondents encountered ethnic profiling, segregated accommodations, and bureaucratic inertia, revealing critical shortcomings in minority-sensitive refugee policies.

Yet, alongside these challenges, the research highlights effective grassroots strategies and promising forms of adaptation. Roma youth have organized solidarity networks, launched educational and advocacy projects, and increasingly engage in transnational human rights initiatives. These actions reveal a robust—though often unrecognized—social capital that, when supported, can evolve into sustainable political, cultural, and civic participation.

Theoretical reflections reinforce these findings. Classical frameworks such as Berry's acculturation theory or segmented assimilation models (Portes and Zhou) fall short when applied to vulnerable minorities like the Roma. These models overlook systemic inequality, stigmatization, and institutional racism. In contrast, more nuanced concepts—translocality, vulnerable citizenship, and hybrid identity—offer a more adequate lens for analyzing the lived

experiences of young Roma, who often navigate multiple cultural, legal, and spatial realities simultaneously.

Therefore, successful integration cannot be achieved through generic social policy alone. Instead, it requires a comprehensive, intersectional approach. This includes institutional reform to confront anti-Gypsyism, targeted mechanisms for inclusion, and sustained investment in youth leadership and self-organization. Roma youth should not be passive recipients of integration policies—they must be active participants in shaping them.

By acknowledging their unique position and amplifying their voice, policymakers can unlock the transformative potential of Roma youth. Their engagement is not only a question of social justice but a vital contribution to building more inclusive, democratic, and resilient societies in Europe.

CHAPTER 8 – Recommendations

For Federal Authorities of Germany

1. Official recognition of Roma as a vulnerable group in displacement contexts

Amend the National Action Plan on Integration and federal migration frameworks to include Ukrainian Roma as a specifically vulnerable group affected by the war. Tailored measures must be developed in education, employment, legal aid, and protection from discrimination.

2. Strengthen anti-discrimination mechanisms

Establish an institutional framework to monitor and combat anti-Gypsyism, including:

- Appointment of a Special Commissioner for Roma Refugees;
- Systematic collection and public reporting of discrimination data;
- Accountability tools within federal ministries.

3. Simplify legalization and documentation processes

Develop fast-track procedures for issuing identity and residence documents to undocumented Roma, in cooperation with Ukrainian consulates. Fund legal aid programs through partnerships with migration centers and Roma-led NGOs.

4. Expand inclusive education measures

Provide federal funding for:

- Preparatory language courses for Roma youth;
- Cultural mediators in schools;

- Inclusive pedagogical approaches adapted to the needs of undereducated refugee children.

5. Support Roma-led youth initiatives

Create targeted grant schemes to support Roma youth organizations focusing on civic engagement, mental health, cultural expression, and countering anti-Gypsyism.

For State and Municipal Authorities

1. Develop localized integration strategies

Create municipal-level action plans for Roma refugee inclusion that ensure equal access to public infrastructure and housing, with input from Roma communities.

2. Prohibit ethnically segregated accommodation

End discriminatory housing practices. Prioritize urban placement with access to transportation, schools, and healthcare. Housing allocation should reflect the needs of families with compounded vulnerabilities.

3. Train frontline staff and service providers

Implement mandatory intercultural sensitivity and anti-discrimination training for municipal employees working in reception centers, schools, and social services.

4. Institutionalize Roma representation

Establish permanent advisory councils or dialogue platforms at the local level with Roma representatives and NGO participation to ensure feedback mechanisms and co-decision-making.

For Civil Society and NGOs

1. Strengthen Roma youth self-organization

International and domestic donors should directly fund Roma youth initiatives, including those led by refugees, to promote autonomy and leadership from within the community.

2. Increase public awareness

Launch public education campaigns that challenge anti-Roma stereotypes and highlight the specific barriers faced by Roma refugees.

3. Provide accompaniment and psychosocial support

Develop coordinated support services—legal, educational, medical, and psychosocial—delivered in a culturally competent manner. Volunteer-based assistance should be supported with institutional backing and funding.

4. Engage in policymaking and advocacy

Human rights organizations should actively contribute to shaping integration and anti-discrimination policies by producing expert analyses, participating in legislative consultations, and monitoring implementation.

5. Build youth leadership capacity

Invest in leadership development through training in project management, policy dialogue, and human rights advocacy. Encourage mentorship schemes and internship placements within public institutions and international bodies.

The implementation of these recommendations would mark a shift from a paternalistic model—in which Roma are treated solely as beneficiaries of aid—toward a partnership model that empowers Roma youth as co-authors of social change. Recognizing their agency, supporting their initiatives, and addressing the systemic discrimination they face are not only moral imperatives but essential steps toward building inclusive, just, and resilient European societies.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Title: Semi-Structured Interview Guide for Ukrainian Roma in Germany

Purpose: To explore experiences of forced displacement, social adaptation, access to rights, and forms of civic engagement among different segments of the Ukrainian Roma community in Germany.

A.1 – Interview Guide for Roma Youth (18–35)

Section 1 – Migration and Displacement

- When did you leave Ukraine and what prompted your departure?
- What challenges did you encounter on the way to Germany?
- Did you travel alone or with family/community?

Section 2 – First Experiences in Germany

- What was your first impression upon arrival?
- How were you received at the border and in reception centers?
- What difficulties did you face in registration or communication?

Section 3 – Adaptation

- Did you attend school, work, or integration courses?
- How did the language barrier affect you?
- Did you face discrimination in everyday life (housing, school, services)?

Section 4 – Identity and Belonging

- How do you identify yourself: Ukrainian, Roma, European, something else?
- Has your sense of identity changed after migration?
- Do you feel part of the local community in Germany?

Section 5 – Activism and Participation

- Are you involved in any community or Roma youth initiatives?
- What motivates you to participate or not participate in civic activities?
- Have you taken part in advocacy, cultural, or volunteer projects?

Section 6 – Aspirations and Reflections

- What do you see as the biggest challenges for young Roma in Germany?
- What kind of support would you like to receive?
- What are your hopes for the future—for yourself and your community?

A.2 – Interview Guide for NGO and Humanitarian Workers

Section 1 – Organizational Role and Target Group

- What is the mission of your organization regarding Roma refugees from Ukraine?
- How do you identify and support vulnerable groups?

Section 2 – Observed Challenges

- What are the main obstacles faced by Ukrainian Roma youth in Germany?

- How do issues such as documentation, discrimination, or education appear in your work?

Section 3 – Institutional Support and Gaps

- Do you collaborate with local authorities or other institutions?
- Are there any systemic gaps in refugee protection for Roma?

Section 4 – Impact and Best Practices

- Can you share examples of successful interventions?
- What practices have proven effective for supporting Roma youth?

Section 5 – Recommendations and Outlook

- What policy changes do you believe are necessary?
- What forms of support are most needed for Roma youth?

A.3 – Interview Guide for Roma Community Leader

Section 1 – Background and Role

- Can you tell us about your experience as a Roma community leader?
- What motivated you to engage in community support and activism?

Section 2 – Observations on Displacement

- What patterns did you observe among Ukrainian Roma arriving in Germany?
- What were the most urgent needs at the early stages?

Section 3 – Mobilization and Solidarity

- How have Roma communities in Germany responded to the arrival of Ukrainian Roma?
- What role does internal solidarity play?

Section 4 – Challenges and Strategies

- What has been most difficult in dealing with institutions or integrating into society?
- What strategies do you use to support others?

Section 5 – Vision and Sustainability

- What future do you envision for Roma youth in Germany and Europe?
- What long-term steps are needed to build resilient Roma communities in exile?