IN TRANSITION: UNDERSTANDING THE SITUATION OF ROMA FROM UKRAINE IN HUNGARY

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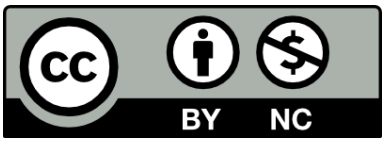

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Vienna, 02 June 2025

Annamaria Kovacs

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the experiences of Roma migrants from Ukraine living in Hungary following the 2022 military conflict. While the European Union's Temporary Protection Directive was designed to offer legal and material support to displaced persons, its implementation in Hungary has resulted in fragmented access and exclusionary practices, particularly toward Roma families. Through qualitative fieldwork conducted in 2025, including nine semi-structured interviews with Roma migrants and professionals in civil society and institutional roles, this research analyzes how migration-related decisions, especially the government decree activated in August 2024, shape the lives of Roma migrants. The analysis draws on multi-layered citizenship theory, the concept of surplus population, and critical perspectives on the changing politics of care. Key findings show that housing insecurity, informal labor market reliance, weak governmental and public institutional coordination, and exclusion pose major challenges for Roma migrants. Civil society actors play a vital role, often substituting state services under conditions of enormous workload and funding uncertainty. The thesis argues for a shift from emergency aid to long-term inclusion strategies embedded in national welfare systems and supported by robust policy reform.

Keywords: Roma migrants, dual citizenship, Temporary Protection Directive, housing insecurity, informal labor, civil society, migration policy.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The year the war began is one I will never forget. It was the hardest winter. We had no firewood, the house was freezing and silent. My husband, who worked in Hungary, could no longer send money. Then he called to say the war had started, and they wouldn't let anyone cross the border back into Ukraine. He said, "*Come to me*." But I didn't understand what that meant. How can I just go? I had no documents. No plan.

I told him no. I couldn't imagine leaving. That was on the 26th.

The next morning, on the 27th, he called again. "*You have five minutes*," he said. "*Grab the boy, the car is outside*."

That night on the 26th, the sirens started. We were in our village, in Western Ukraine. There was no shooting yet, but the sirens blared through the night. I stuffed earbuds into my son's ears and played music so he wouldn't hear the noise. The street emptied out. It was just me and my six-year-old son in the cold. The electricity was cut.

I remember thinking, How do I go? But the car was there. They said, "*Just come as you are*." It was the morning of February 27. I wore football slippers. I had never travelled abroad. I pictured us arriving in Budapest with nowhere to go, my child barefoot and freezing on the street.

But we made it across. A friend drove us. To my surprise, help was waiting. We were brought to an assembly hall filled with 200 other people. My son and I had spent two days at the border before getting through. When we arrived there, he had a 41-degree fever. An ambulance rushed him to the intensive care. My blood pressure had reached 200. There were so many people that my child was nearly trampled. The border guards noticed. They reached in and pulled us out.

They called an ambulance right away. We had no destination. They took us somewhere, I still don't know exactly where. A hospital. My son stayed behind. I sat on a hard chair for four days while my son lay in intensive care. I truly thought I would die.

I feared he had COVID, but it turned out to be a severe throat infection. I couldn't take my shoes off after three days; my feet were so swollen. Even now, years later, I can't forget that moment at the border, cold air, rubber slippers, my boy frozen stiff.

Recently, we went back. Only three mothers were there. I turned to one of the volunteers at the border and asked, "*Where is everyone*?" Three years ago, there were 200 of us. Now, just three.

And even now, when I return to Hungary, I feel torn. My son goes to a Hungarian school and he does amazing. The border signs are all in Hungarian. It feels like home. And yet, I still wonder what will happen next.

(A displaced mother – part of the interview, recorded in May 2025)[2]

[2] This story is a reconstructed narrative based on an in-depth interview conducted with a Ukrainian mother in 2025. The original interview was conducted in Hungarian and later translated and adapted in length by the author. Names and identifying details have been left out for confidentiality.

The armed conflict in Ukraine in February 2022 triggered one of the largest forced displacement crises in Europe since World War II: over six million people have fled the country, with neighboring states like Poland, Romania, and Hungary becoming primary destinations (UNHCR 2023). Among these displaced populations are Roma families, many of whom were already living on the socio-economic margins in Ukraine, who face enormous challenges due to entrenched racialization, poverty, and bureaucratic difficulties (European Roma Rights Centre and Chiricli 2014). Although the European Union activated the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD, Council of the European Union 2022) to provide immediate legal status, housing, and labor market access for Ukrainians, research shows that its implementation often fails to address the specific needs of Roma people in transition (Kovács et al. 2023; Hegedüs et al. 2023).

This thesis investigates the broad timeline of transition and support of Roma migrants from Ukraine to Hungary, and how a recent policy change (Government Decree 104/2022. III.12. 2/A §.) introduced on the 21th of August, 2025 has affected the support and the coping of Roma migrant families; moreover, it will reflect on how they navigate a fragmented system of support marked by institutional uncertainty, political ambivalence, informal networks, and civil society interventions. The research also addresses the enormous effort of civil society and helping institutions. The case of Ukrainian Roma migrants provides a theoretical lens through which broader questions of belonging, migration governance, and social inclusion in contemporary Europe can be analyzed.

Research aim

This thesis aims to understand how migration and migration-related policies, especially the latest introduced by 21st of August, 2024 in Hungary, shape the lives of Roma migrants, and how institutions can help.

The central research question is:

How does the recent policy change in Hungary affect the lives of Roma migrants from Ukraine?

Supporting sub-questions include:

1. What are the main institutional and societal barriers faced by Roma migrants from Ukraine in Hungary?
2. How do local institutional and civil society actors respond to the needs of Roma migrants?
3. What is the effect of the policy change and shrinking support?
4. What can be the structural reasons behind it?

Theoretical orientation

The analysis draws on Nira Yuval-Davis's (1999, 2007) concept of multi-layered citizenship and the politics of belonging. This is combined with an intersectional approach (Crenshaw 1989; Yuval-Davis 2007) to explore how gender, social position, ethnicity, and legal status interact to produce differentiated experiences of exclusion.

Furthermore, this research engages with the concept of surplus population (Vincze 2023), which draws from Marxist theory to understand the structural production of populations considered "disposable" or irregular within capitalist labor markets. Roma people often embody this surplus status, circulating between precarious labor, marginal housing, and fragmented service access (Kovai & Vigvári 2025). In addition, existing scholarship highlights how Roma migrants are often framed as threats rather than rights-bearing members of society, leading to exclusionary governance practices that prioritize control over inclusion within European migration regimes (Yıldız and De Genova 2018; van Baar 2019; Rajaram 2021).The study also

considers how the politics of care (Read and Thelen 2007) shape responses to displacement in Hungary, where civil society often substitutes for a retreating welfare state.

Methodological Overview

This study is based on qualitative fieldwork conducted in Hungary during May 2025. Methods include semi-structured interviews with Roma migrants, colleagues of NGOs, local social institutions, and church-based organizations; field observations and diaries; group discussions; and policy document analysis. This research recognizes that lived experiences of individuals, particularly those at the intersection of ethnicity, social position, gender, and migration status offer essential insights, but also acknowledges the experience of the helpers. By foregrounding the perspectives of Roma migrants, the research highlights both the structural barriers they face and their capacity for agency, as expressed through coping strategies, mobility, and community networks.

Thesis Structure

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: Contextual Background

Chapter 3: Literature Review

Chapter 4: Theoretical Framework

Chapter 5: Methodology

Chapter 6: Discussion: Findings and Analysis

Chapter 7: Conclusion

CHAPTER TWO: CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

This study investigates how recent Hungarian policy changes affect the everyday lives of Ukrainian Roma migrants, focusing on what happens to them and where they can find a place within Hungarian society. While the Temporary Protection Directive has been implemented across many EU member states in response to the war in Ukraine (TPD, Council of the European Union 2022), its consequences for Roma refugees remain underexplored. This research specifically examines Hungary's 2024 regulatory change, which introduced new territorial and conditional criteria for receiving shelter and social support, and intends to assess its impact on Ukrainian Roma families (Helsinki Committee 2024).

As of April 2025, over 6.3 million Ukrainian refugees were registered globally, with Hungary currently hosting over 63,000 asylum seekers and temporary protection beneficiaries (UNHCR 2025). Since the invasion began in February 2022, over 1.3 million people fled to Hungary, mainly for protection from conflict rather than economic opportunity (UNHCR 2022; Kovács et al. 2023).

Ukrainian Roma in Ukraine

Roma communities in Ukraine, estimated at 200,000–400,000 individuals, face deep structural disadvantages rooted in historical marginalization, institutional neglect, and discriminatory practices (Romaversitas 2022). A key barrier is the widespread lack of personal documents, such as birth certificates, internal passports, and property records, which limits access to education, healthcare, housing, and employment (ERRC & Chiricli 2014). Roma people often live in segregated settlements, particularly in Transcarpathia, where many lack legal registration and live in substandard housing under threat of eviction (ERRC & Chiricli 2014). School segregation is widespread, with many Roma children placed in under-resourced or special-

needs schools regardless of actual need, resulting in low literacy and poor educational outcomes (ERRC & Chiricli 2014, Romaversitas 2022). The Romaversitas (2022) research highlights that Transcarpathian Roma, comprising nearly a third of the national Roma population, are especially disadvantaged due to the region's peripheral status and economic stagnation, which also means housing struggles and spatial segregation.

Ukrainian migrants in Hungary: implementation of the EU directive

Since in February 2022, Hungary has applied the EU's Temporary Protection Directive based on eligibility conditions to accommodate displaced individuals, as one of the first EU countries with the Temporary Protection so-called sheltered status with entitlements for accommodation, healthcare, employment, school, and financial aid (Hungarian Helsinki Committee - HHC 2024). However, the implementation of this framework has revealed several inconsistencies, particularly affecting Roma migrants and Hungarian-Ukrainian dual citizens.

A significant number of dual citizens, primarily from the Transcarpathia region, home to approximately 150,000 ethnic Hungarians, crossed to Hungary after the outbreak of the conflict (HHC 2025). Although these individuals held Hungarian citizenship, they were not covered under the Temporary Protection scheme due to their legal status (HHC 2025). At the same time, they were also excluded from full citizen benefits tied to Hungarian residency and social security registration (HHC 2025). To address this gap, a provision was introduced allowing dual citizens who had permanent residence in Ukraine to access the same support as TP beneficiaries, unless more favorable treatment was available based on their Hungarian citizenship (HHC, 2025). By the end of 2024, over 32,000 such individuals had applied for financial assistance under this scheme (HHC, 2025).

Despite this inclusionary clause, the overall housing system remained chaotic and fragmented, with no central governmental coordination of shelters (HHC, 2025, and thesis interviews). Instead, accommodation was largely managed by municipalities, NGOs, international agencies, and private actors, using improvised spaces such as schools, cultural centers, and empty public buildings. Although government support was available to contracted providers, the financial contribution fluctuated significantly from 4,000 HUF per day to 7,000 HUF, before being reduced to 5,000 HUF in August 2023 (HHC 2025).

Access to this support also became increasingly conditional. A legislative change in Government Decree 337/2023 introduced strict eligibility criteria for continued access to accommodation and food support (HHC 2025). As of August 2024, only TP beneficiaries considered vulnerable and from government-designated "regions directly impacted by war" were entitled to mass shelter funded by the state based on amending Gov. Decree 104/2022 (HHC, 2025). Those from other areas had to submit leniency requests by July 10, 2024, and due to the close deadline and administration difficulties, only 1,486 requests were submitted; 80% of which were rejected without explanation, raising concerns about the process and administrative transparency (HHC 2025)[3].

A further complication came with Government Decree 343/2024, which extended the legal validity of TP cards until March 2026. However, physical cards were not reissued to reflect this change, leading many public institutions to mistakenly believe the protection had expired, denying services to eligible individuals (HHC 2025). This issue was also echoed in interviews conducted for this research, confirming a widespread lack of awareness and up-to-date information among public service providers.

[3] The government commissioner must issue formally valid decisions and provide justifications for rejections in accordance with the final court ruling: https://helsinki.hu/a-kurian-nyertek-pert-a-karpataljai-menedekes-csaladok/

The withdrawal of the financial support of all accommodation providers, except municipalities and the Maltese Charity Service, from government funding as of August 2024 further illustrates the narrowing of access within the protection system (HHC 2025). These developments reflect a broader shift from a humanitarian to a highly conditional and territorial restriction, raising concerns about the erosion of protection standards and the structural exclusion of groups like Roma migrants (HHC 2025). This evolving policy landscape underscores the urgent need for a more consistent and inclusive approach.

CHAPTER THREE: LITERATURE REVIEW

This theoretical framework aims to contextualize the situation of Ukrainian Roma within broader structural dynamics of belonging and migration governance, racialized exclusion, and welfare conditionality. By anchoring the analysis in relevant literature, this section provides the conceptual tools necessary to understand the systemic factors shaping their experiences in Hungary.

Citizenship and belonging

Nira Yuval-Davis created a concept of multi-layered citizenship that challenges traditional, state-centric definitions by proposing that citizenship is constructed through overlapping and intersecting layers influenced by specific historical contexts and power dynamics (Yuval-Davis 1999). This framework emphasizes that individual rights and responsibilities are mediated by their memberships in various collectivities, and that factors such as social position, gender, ethnicity, and ability significantly shape their experiences of citizenship (Yuval-Davis 1999). Yuval-Davis argues that for citizenship to be inclusive and democratic, it must acknowledge these intersecting social divisions and the complex ways they interact within different layers of belonging (Yuval-Davis 1999).

Yuval-Davis (1999) further explores the politics of belonging, examining how the construction of boundaries between "insiders" and "outsiders" is influenced by intersecting social divisions. She critiques the shift from "multiculturalism" to "social cohesion", illustrating how the use of civic and democratic values as signifiers of belonging can become exclusionary rather than inclusionary. This shift often marginalizes minority groups, particularly those constructed as "other", despite their formal entitlement to citizenship (Yuval-Davis 1999).

In her later work, Yuval-Davis (2007) integrates intersectionality into the analysis of citizenship and belonging, highlighting how multiple social divisions of ethnicity, race, gender, and social position interact to shape individual experiences and identities. She critiques the model of intersectionality, advocating for an approach that examines how different social divisions are concretely embedded and constructed by each other, and how they relate to political and subjective constructions of identities, such as in the case of Roma migrants who challenge the categories of refugee, migrant, foreign worker, or dual citizen and become a complex negotiation of belonging (Yuval-Davis 2007).

Labor migration and Ukraine workforce mobility in Europe

Labor migration from Eastern to Central and Western Europe is driven primarily by disparities in job accessibility, unemployment rates, and the demand for flexible work (Dzenovska 2018). These dynamics create significant social and economic consequences for both migrants and host countries (Dzenovska 2018). Scholars emphasize that workforce mobility often reproduces inequalities, as migrants are typically relegated to low-status, precarious jobs due to the structural demand for cheap, flexible labor (Dzenovska 2018). Additionally, Lewicki (2023) highlights the racialization embedded within labor hierarchies, where Eastern European workers, including marginalized groups such as the Roma, face discrimination and systemic precarity (Kaneff and Pine 2011).

Kalmar (2023) situates these migration patterns within the specific historical and socio-political context of post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe, cautioning against simplistic comparisons with Global North-South power asymmetries. The region's unique post-socialist marginalities shape labor migration dynamics distinctively, even as they resonate with broader global inequalities (Kalmar 2023). This structural positioning explains the high levels of East-to-West

labor mobility, driven by uneven economic development and post-industrial job scarcity (Dzenovska 2018).

Economic necessity remains the primary migration driver for countries in the Eastern Partnership, including Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and Belarus (Mamaiev 2025). Mamaiev (2025) argues that migration serves as a household survival strategy, relieving poverty and easing labor market pressures at home while contributing remittances abroad. In response, EU destination countries have adapted migration policies to accommodate this labor influx (Mamaierv 2025). Before 2022, over three million Ukrainians worked abroad; following the war, temporary protection registrations reached four million in Poland, Romania, Germany, Hungary, and Slovakia (Mamaiev 2025).

Surplus population, marginalization, and racialized poverty

Labor migration in Central and Eastern Europe must be understood through the lens of racial and structural inequalities, particularly affecting the Roma population in Hungary. Vincze (2023) revisits Marx's concept of surplus population to describe workers excluded from stable employment but maintained as a flexible labor reserve, a dynamic that shapes migrant strategies amid labor shortages. These surplus populations experience continuous circulation between unemployment and precarious work, agriculture and industry, rural and urban areas, making mobility a central survival strategy (Kovai & Vigvári 2025).

Marginalization is conceptualized as intertwined social and economic exclusion marked by unequal access to resources and agency (Hall 2013). Rajaram (2015) links this to the management of "unproductive" populations pushed to the margins. Szombati (2018) highlights the politicized visibility of Roma identity in Hungary, where ethnic divisions are instrumentalized by the state to reinforce structural inequality. Far from alleviating poverty, migration and socio-economic transformations have racialized poverty and intensified the

securitization of Roma communities through control-oriented governance (van Baar 2018, 2019).

Kalmar (2023) connects these dynamics to broader geopolitical inequalities and securitizing discourses, while Anghel (2023) illustrates how European minority rights frameworks have failed to dismantle exclusion, instead fostering "irregularization" and exceptional governance over Roma access to education, housing, and rights. Lewicki (2023) situates these regional processes within the wider racialization of Eastern European migrants in Western Europe, deepening Roma marginalization through intersecting racial and regional stigmas.

Together, these studies highlight the persistent deepening of poverty, racialization, and exclusion through post-socialist transformation, underscoring the limited success of European institutions in addressing Roma marginalization.

Racialized mobility of Roma migrants

Understanding migration patterns requires situating them within the relational hierarchies established by capitalist center-periphery structures. Faist (2016) highlights that these power dynamics significantly influence which migrants gain access to freedom of movement, employment opportunities, and settlement rights, thereby creating unequal mobility regimes. The case of Roma migration across Europe vividly illustrates these intersecting inequalities. Scholars such as Yıldız and De Genova (2018) emphasize that Roma mobility is not simply an economic phenomenon but is deeply intertwined with historic processes of marginalization, racialization, and securitization. Across European states, Roma populations are subjected to exclusionary policies that frame their movement as a security risk rather than a legitimate migratory practice (Yıldız and De Genova 2018).

Despite official recognition of the Roma as a "European minority" by the European Union, they continue to be constructed as racialized outsiders excluded from the dominant narratives of European identity (Yıldız and De Genova 2018). Neoliberal capitalist transformations have further narrowed Roma access to opportunities relative to other migrant groups, reinforcing racialized interpretations of their mobility (Yıldız and De Genova 2018). This racialization of Roma migrants parallels the racialization experienced by non-European migrants, whereby Roma mobility is persistently securitized, marking them as "out of place" not only geographically but also culturally and symbolically (Yıldız and De Genova 2018). This form of "othering" undermines their claims to full citizenship and social belonging within European societies (Yıldız and De Genova 2018).

Public discourse frequently problematizes Roma migrants, depicting them as social threats requiring control or expulsion (Yıldız and De Genova 2018; van Baar 2019; Rajaram 2021). These narratives underpin systemic labor exploitation in informal sectors, characterized by low wages and a lack of legal protection, reflecting wider societal resistance to recognizing Roma mobility as a legitimate right (Yıldız and De Genova 2018). Consequently, governance approaches toward Roma migrants prioritize control and securitization rather than inclusion and integration (van Baar 2019). This dynamic raises critical questions about the selective legitimization of mobility within European migration regimes and the continued marginalization of Roma populations (Yıldız and De Genova 2018).

Housing challenges

The ongoing transformation of capitalism continues to shape spatial inequalities across Central and Eastern Europe through institutional mechanisms that prioritize profit-driven investments (Pósfai & Jelinek 2019). Housing governance in the region reflects broader global economic trends, where access to property, housing policy, and urban development are structured by

historical legacies and financial dynamics (Pósfai & Jelinek 2019). Despite national policy differences, many Central and Eastern European countries face challenges in ensuring equitable housing access, which has led to deepening social and spatial disparities (Pósfai & Jelinek 2019).

The post-1989 withdrawal of the state from the housing sector exacerbated these inequalities, resulting in housing privatization, shrinking public stock, and unregulated rent markets (Pósfai & Jelinek 2019). The 2008 financial crisis further intensified overcrowding, evictions, and speculative real estate practices, disproportionately affecting marginalized groups in underdeveloped or segregated areas (Florea, Gagyi & Jacobsson 2019). Roma communities are especially vulnerable, often confined to socioeconomically isolated regions and subjected to patterns of exclusion and displacement (Szombati 2018).

The migrant influx from Ukraine has magnified these systemic weaknesses. Newcomers, including both Roma and non-Roma Ukrainians, encountered a housing system ill-equipped to support integration due to its legacy of homeownership bias and underdeveloped rental and social housing markets (Hegedüs et al. 2023). Emergency measures under the EU's Temporary Protection Directive provided initial support, but long-term integration remains hindered by persistent structural barriers: spatial mismatches, legal instability, insufficient funding, and entrenched discrimination, especially against Roma migrants (Hegedüs et al. 2023). Local NGO-led initiatives offer some promise, yet remain under-resourced; consequently, these developments reflect the intersection of poverty, racialization, and institutional neglect across the region (Hegedüs et al., 2023).

Changing politics of care

The transformation of welfare systems across Europe under neoliberal governance has significantly altered how poverty, care, and marginality are understood. As Read and Thelen

(2007) argue, the state's gradual withdrawal from welfare provision has reframed poverty as an individual failure, replacing structural explanations with narratives of personal responsibility. This shift is particularly relevant in the context of marginalized communities, such as the Roma, whose needs are increasingly assessed through moralized lenses of deservingness, dependency, and integration (Read and Thelen 2007).

Anghel (2023) traces how the Roma have moved through successive policy frames: first, the urgent recognition of their poverty; second, the identification of their minority rights; and finally, the persistent failure to resolve poverty-related exclusion. Van Baar (2019) critiques the resulting "anti-policies," which claim to address instability or underdevelopment but in effect reinforce exclusion through racialized and securitized frameworks, serving as a base for clientelism and control rather than addressing underlying inequalities.

This broader European trend is mirrored in Hungary's evolving poverty governance: after early social policy experiments in the mid-2000s, the 2008 financial crisis triggered a punitive shift toward "workfare" models (Keller & Virág 2025). Public employment schemes became the dominant tool of poverty management, emphasizing discipline and conditionality (Keller & Virág 2025). Following 2010, policy discourse abandoned structural approaches and the principle of equal opportunity; instead, integration and "catching up" became guiding narratives, while EU development funds were repurposed for individualized, moralized interventions that did little to alleviate regional inequality (Keller & Virág 2025).

In the last decades, Hungarian poverty discourse has further narrowed, adopting a care-politics framework that depoliticizes poverty by framing it as a localized issue rather than a structural one (Keller and Virág 2025). As Keller and Virág (2025) highlight, this marks a consolidation of control and moral regulation, where the visibility of poverty itself diminishes, and governance increasingly targets behavior rather than systemic reform.

Taken together, these main theories reveal how welfare austerities, moralized policy discourses, and racialized governance intersect to shape the lived experiences of marginalized groups within shifting regimes of social care and poverty management in Hungary.

Moral economy

In peripheral and marginalized regions where institutional support is limited, economic intermediaries (commonly referred to as brokers in the Hungarian term) play a crucial role in mediating access to essential resources (Durst 2025). The moral economy framework thus provides a critical lens for understanding how survival strategies in impoverished areas are shaped by informal governance and moral judgments; furthermore, it highlights how local norms regulate power imbalances and sustain fragile social arrangements under conditions of systemic neglect (Thompson, 1971; Durst, 2025).

Civic solidarity and support for displaced Ukrainians in Hungary

Recent scholarship highlights the evolving landscape of civic solidarity in response to forced displacement, particularly concerning Ukrainians displaced since the so-called refugee crisis in 2015 and notably in 2022 (Zakariás et al. 2023). Zakariás et al. (2023) document a significant expansion and diversification of grassroots support across Europe, with Hungary exemplifying a society-wide consensus on the importance of solidarity toward displaced populations. However, while public attitudes reveal broad endorsement of helping refugees (Kyriazi 2022), the practical burden of care disproportionately falls on an increasingly marginalized, feminized, and overextended care workforce, supplemented by extensive voluntary civic engagement (Zakariás et al. 2023). This dynamic reflects broader neoliberal governance trends, where the retreat of the state from social welfare shifts responsibility onto non-profit actors and precarious labor forces, commodifying care and exploiting volunteer labor (Zakariás et al. (2023).

Moreover, Zakariás et al. (2023) emphasize the fragility of these solidarities in contexts where populist and xenophobic political forces dominate, which complicates the integration processes. These findings resonate with critical narratives on care, highlighting the tensions of the "structural commodification of social support" in neoliberal regimes (Keller & Virág 2025).

CHAPTER FOUR: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

To understand the situation of Ukrainian Roma migrants in Hungary, this study draws on the main theoretical perspectives addressing layered citizenship, care politics, and surplus populations. Yuval-Davis's (1999, 2007) concept of multi-layered citizenship and politics of belonging highlights how individuals may possess legal status without social inclusion, especially when coming from an ethnic background with multiple forms of vulnerability of social positions, ethnicity, gender, and migrant status.

Complementing this, the politics of care framework (Read & Thelen 2007; Keller & Virág 2025) helps explain how neoliberal welfare regimes shift responsibility onto individuals and NGOs, often leaving care provision to under-resourced civil society actors. Additionally, the adaptation of Vincze (2023), the surplus population concept sheds light on how marginalized groups are absorbed into insecure labor markets, while women and children are relegated to fragmented welfare systems. These perspectives, along with other themes, collectively show how exclusion is structured within Hungary's migration, labor, and care institutions.

CHAPTER FIVE: METHODOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

This thesis implements a qualitative methodology. To achieve this, the thesis research combines semi-structured interviews, field notes, short policy document analysis, literature review, and one group discussion. The methodological approach is guided by ethical principles of informed consent and confidentiality.

Research design and sampling

A purposive and snowball sampling strategy was used to identify and recruit participants. Given the complexity of the target group and the research questions, purposive sampling allowed for the intentional selection of participants with specific knowledge or experience relevant to the topic: Roma migrants fleeing from Ukraine and professionals involved in housing, education, social work, and legal support.

The initial set of participants, firstly professionals, were selected based on their institutional roles and proximity to the target group. Additionally, Roma migrants were contacted through snowball sampling, based on the recommendations of institutions or existing participants. This dual strategy made it possible to access both institutional and lived perspectives.

Due to the high workload and limited capacity of key actors in the field, the number of interviews was fewer than initially planned. Nevertheless, data was pursued through contact and multiple visits to field sites, which also helped strengthen rapport and trust, especially important in working with displaced Roma women.

Data collection

In total, six semi-structured interviews were conducted with professionals from key institutional domains and three interviews with Roma migrants, including two mothers and one father. These

interviews were complemented by one group discussion held with mothers residing in a temporary shelter, alongside field notes taken during multiple site visits. Short policy documents were also reviewed to contextualize the empirical findings within recent legal developments.

The semi-structured format offered flexibility while maintaining consistency in thematic focus across interviews. Interview guides were tailored for each group of participants: professionals were asked about institutional challenges and responses, while Roma interviewees were encouraged to share personal narratives around housing, welfare, and education. The interviews were conducted in settings preferred by participants, where they felt safe and comfortable.

Ethical considerations

This study involves human participants and places strong emphasis on ethical integrity. All participants received verbal and written information outlining the aim of the study, methods, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation.

Interviews were conducted with sensitivity to the participants' emotional well-being. Given the potential risk of discomfort, interviews were designed to proceed at the interviewee's pace, with the option to pause or terminate at any time. Ethical compliance was following the guidelines of the Ethical Research Committee of CEU.

All data was fully anonymized. Identifiable information was only retained when explicit consent was provided and was stored securely, but the analysis was developed anonymized. Digital data (audio files, transcripts, coding documents) was encrypted and stored securely.

Data analysis

Interview transcripts and field notes were analyzed using thematic coding. A detailed coding framework was developed to organize data across descriptive and interpretive categories. The structure included the following elements (Saldaña 2021):

Code	Description
1	Respondent
2	Interview question number
3	Structural code (what, where, who)
4	Descriptive code (word/phrase capturing the idea)
5	Emerging themes
6	Quotation (exact phrase)
7	Possible theoretical link

Coding was carried out initially by descriptive codes captured recurring topics, which were then refined into broader themes. Where relevant, connections were made to theoretical concepts, which are elaborated upon in the literature review. The coding was done manually using the interview transcribes in Microsoft Word, then copied and organized into Excel-files.

Positionality

I acknowledge my positionality as a scholar with background in community work and civil society engagement in Hungary. While this insider knowledge facilitated sensitivity in the field,

care was taken to remain reflexive about potential biases and positionality as a non-Roma researcher.

Limitations

While the scope of the study was necessarily limited by institutional access and time constraints, it offers important insights into the lived experiences of a highly marginalized group during a period of acute policy change. Participants may benefit indirectly through the dissemination of findings that aim to influence inclusive policy design and improve service delivery.

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

In this section, the aim is to analyze the effect of migration and migration-related policies, especially the latest introduced by the 21st of August, 2024, in Hungary, shape the lives of Roma migrants, and how institutions can help in different contexts.

This discussion section primarily integrates empirical findings from observations, readings and interviews with Roma migrants from Ukraine, social workers, NGO representatives, and volunteers, analyzed through a multi-level theoretical lens combining the concept of belonging (Yuval-Davis 1999) change in welfare systems (Read & Thelen 2007), surplus population theory (Vincze 2023), and civic response frameworks (Zakariás et al. 2023). It highlights the lived realities of Roma newcomer families in Hungary through their experiences in labor markets, housing, and social support.

This chapter includes and builds upon thematic summaries from nine interviews and direct quotations from interviewees through theoretical analysis.

Timeline of institutional and civil society help to the Ukrainian crisis in Hungary based on expert interviews (2022–2023)

The conflict in Ukraine that started in February 2022 triggered a rapid, largely civil society-led humanitarian response in Hungary. Consequently, a broad overview of the help is essential to highlight the main areas and themes related to life in Hungary. Based on six expert interviews with professionals from various sectors involved in the process since February 2022, a clear timeline can be established to characterize the support and events following the outbreak of the conflict. It is also presented in parallel with the three interviews conducted with displaced persons from Ukraine. In the absence of early formal state coordination or international

assistance, grassroots organizations, faith-based and some social institutions mobilized quickly to meet the urgent needs of newly arrived individuals and families, many of whom were Roma families. The evolution of institutional help and civil engagement can be understood as unfolding across five distinct phases.

1. February–March 2022: civil society fills the immediate necessities

In the earliest days of the new refugee crisis, civil society actors played a central role in organizing emergency logistics, collecting donations, and delivering aid directly. With only a small existing state coordination, these groups took the initiative to conduct detailed needs assessments at informal shelters and private host accommodations. Aid distribution was carefully tailored: from baby formula and hygiene items to appropriate clothing, based on the needs of infants, children's age groups, and gender at various sites.

> "I posted a volunteer call on Facebook, saying that war means refugees will arrive, and sure enough, within a day or two, the first wave came. We were prepared. We immediately launched community donation drives and coordinated volunteers. Because we had already laid the groundwork during the 2015 crisis, people quickly joined us: corporate teams, volunteer groups, circles of friends, even entire school classes." - Leader of a church-based institution and helping center, Budapest

> "They offered like 600 beds across different shelters, and 70 million forints were raised in donations. Congregations and social institutions mobilized, and it was an incredible show of unity. There was a nationwide wave of solidarity, and within the church community, too. It was truly moving to witness."- Leader of a church-based housing support office, Hungary

Volunteer mobilization was both rapid and massive. A huge number of individuals participated in this early effort, transforming many church and public basements into logistics hubs with often voluntary offerings from businesses. At this stage, the burden of humanitarian care fell on civil actors, churches, and ad hoc community networks, many of whom had previous experience from the 2025 crisis.

2. Spring 2022: emergency state infrastructure emerges

By spring, the Hungarian Disaster Management Authority began responding to the influx by setting up emergency shelters. These were typically located in sports halls or other public buildings not designed for long-term habitation. Although the state began offering basic amenities, such as free meals and temporary beds, these shelters were often inadequate in terms of privacy, sanitation, and family cohesion.

> "We encountered a whole group of people who received no support at all. These were families living in private homes, who offered shelter informally to often Roma families staying with distant relatives. It was incredibly difficult for the hosts to feed everyone, and they received no compensation for housing or food from the Hungarian state." - Leader of a church-based institution and helping center, Budapest

In response, civil society groups adapted their roles. With numerous newcomers relocating to state-run facilities, NGOs shifted their aid efforts to complement these new structures, while also continuing to support those outside them. A significant gap remained in the form of limited subsidy policies: while shelters housing individuals were eligible for state financial support, private citizens hosting refugees received no assistance. Church-based organizations and leading social and housing institutions continued to play a key role in bridging this gap.

3. Summer–fall 2022: integration and development-oriented programs begin

A major turning point came when the Municipality of Budapest and international donors signed a project contract with many of these institutions, supported through funding from major donors. This allowed for the development of more structured services aimed not just at immediate survival, but at social integration and long-term well-being.

> "We wanted to create a trauma-informed community space: a place that could calm the nervous system of people in flight. Many arrived in a state of paralysis, where it was hard to take even the smallest step forward, to access their own

> strength, or reconnect with their sense of agency." - Leader of a church-based institution and helping center, Budapest

Among the key initiatives was the launch of play hubs, child-friendly spaces for early development. These services focused on strengthening mother-child relationships, supporting neurodevelopment, and offering early intervention for trauma. Critically, the inclusion of child-supporting services enabled mothers, most of whom were single parents, to participate in Hungarian language courses, attend official appointments, or seek employment.

> "Children who started school much later fell far behind. The isolation of online learning left many of them with mental health issues, and they're constantly accumulating disadvantages in subject-specific knowledge." - Leader of a church-based institution and helping center, Budapest

> "With most families, we start by supporting their housing: that's the foundation. From there, we help with integration: enrolling children in school or kindergarten. At the same time, alongside our social work team, we have a group dedicated to helping people access the job market."- Lead social worker in a church-based low threshold support office, Hungary

Some NGOs explicitly avoided creating parallel so-called pop-up schools and instead focused on integrating children into mainstream kindergartens and schools. The rationale was clear: early enrollment stabilized children's emotional well-being and facilitated their acquisition of the Hungarian language. Some organizations created other types of in-person educational groups.

> "We offered short-term vocational trainings and skills that were actually in demand on the labor market, and it really worked. It was a strong direction, especially since people were being taken straight from schools to work sites. We also ran Hungarian language courses and did awareness-raising in schools. We've worked across many areas of refugee support, but the core has always been social work: supporting integration, managing crises, helping with housing and basic needs. And for four years now, we've also been active in labor market integration." - Leader of a church-based institution and helping center, Budapest

Complementary support programs were also introduced, including tutoring sessions, language courses, summer camps, job-related skills development and training, and mental health

interventions, such as support groups and art therapy, all designed to foster resilience and community belonging in a trauma-informed way.

4. Late 2022–2023: institutionalization of services

As the crisis shifted from acute emergency to ongoing displacement, civil society organizations began to institutionalize their services. These services have already reacted many times to the needs of settling in and bridging institutional help, such as phone interpretation services that were especially critical in navigating Hungary's complex system, which can be difficult even for native speakers.

> "We help with interpretation and translation: hundreds of documents get translated into Hungarian. We also assist with certifications, so clients can more easily access work, school, or kindergarten." - Lead social worker in a church-based low threshold support office, Hungary

> "We worked with these families from the beginning, and at least half, maybe even two-thirds, of our clients were from Transcarpathia, Hungarian and Hungarian Roma. We're still working with them today. There were institutions that outright refused to take in Roma, which was shocking. They were the ones who got stuck in the care system the most, and for them, it hurt the most." - Leader of a church-based institution and helping center, Hungary

Social work, legal help, and labor market counselors emerged as a core component of institution activity with the help of drop-in centers. A defining feature of these services was their low-threshold, non-discriminatory access model. Assistance was offered regardless of formal migration status, with no exclusion based on documentation. Instead, they applied a developmental approach: aid (including material or financial support) was offered for a limited period (typically 2–4 months) and tied to collaborative goal-setting, such as school participation of the children. Clients were expected to actively participate in planning and working toward their goals through empowerment and accountability within a supportive framework. At this point, while there was an enormous support mobilized, serious tensions began to emerge around

the inclusion of Ukrainian Roma migrants into Hungarian society, as many service providers and institutions, formally or informally, started to reject them, which reflected broader societal discrimination.

5. Ongoing challenges and structural gaps

Despite the relative success of these efforts, significant systemic challenges remain. Main international donors finished their support, while others had to stop abruptly due to the recent withdrawal of international development funds.

Housing and employment integration are still particularly demanding. Many employers offered conditional accommodation tied to jobs, but wages are often so low that families are left without sufficient income for food, transportation, or school supplies. This especially impacted Roma migrants living in private accommodations, who were excluded from state subsidies.

Part of the ongoing challenges, from February 2022–August 2024, Hungary rapidly implemented the EU Temporary Protection Directive to assist those fleeing the Ukrainian conflict, but the system evolved into a fragmented one, particularly affecting Roma migrants and dual citizens through inconsistent eligibility rules, uncoordinated shelter provision, and tightening restrictions on state support (HHC 2025).

Thematic analysis

Main themes from the empirical material

1. Housing insecurity as a central structural barrier

Following the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine in February 2022, Hungary implemented a series of ad hoc emergency housing measures for incoming refugees, as mentioned in all interviews. Later an allocation system was introduced to distribute migrants across Hungary to

balance the burden regionally: accommodation providers, including small hotels and pensions, were eligible for limited state compensation if they could host at least 20 people (Hegedüs et al., 2023). Churches and social institutions started to operate collective accommodations to offer support.

> "In just three months, we lived in nine different places. It wasn't even enough time to unpack our small suitcases, as two or three days later, we'd be packing up again, without knowing where or why we had to go next. The whole family suffered. Then we stayed in the sports hall, but we always received a lot of help. Now we have lived here for two years." - An interviewed displaced mother from Ukraine now residing in a collective accommodation.

Solidarity-based housing, where private individuals offered temporary shelter, emerged early on and was later partially formalized through rental compensation schemes. However, Hungary's reliance on short-term, volunteer-driven systems has underscored the limitations of its institutional preparedness and long-term housing planning (Hegedüs et al. 2023), and this system was highly affected by the Decree valid from August 21. 2024.

Across all interviews, housing emerged as a dominant theme. Respondents repeatedly emphasized that most Roma families cannot access stable housing, either because of affordability or discrimination in the rental market. Even those who could afford rent often faced refusal after landlords "heard their name" (Interview Nr.7) or learned they were Roma. This mirrors structural racism embedded in Hungary's housing market and reflects a broader systemic failure to offer social housing or support transitional schemes for vulnerable refugee families (Pósfai & Jelinek 2019).

Some institutions provide collective accommodation with or without social work based on capacities, which many times serve as the only housing option for big families still after the restriction of financial support from social institutions until there is financial support.

> "Right now, we're in the middle of this process: we're working closely to help as many families as possible move into independent housing as soon as we can.

> Regardless of decrees… well, I guess that's no longer up to us to decide. There are families whose strengths and capacities just aren't there yet. I'm not sure what the next steps will be for them. But for those who are ready, those who can sustain themselves, we can absolutely support them in making that move." - Lead social worker, of a housing institution, Budapest

> "The institution, the whole system, says it's not healthy to live in mass shelters, and I see that too. But it's hard to talk about. There are children who were born here and know no other world. This is their reality." - Lead social worker, of a housing institution, Budapest

Some interviewees described extreme housing precarity, where landlords arbitrarily evicted tenants due to pregnancy or family size, regardless of rent payment compliance. This aligns with van Baar's (2019) analysis of how racialized migrants are often positioned within moralized narratives of undeservingness or being unreliant. Roma families are not merely homeless at the moment in Hungary: the families are not able to obtain temporary or long-term housing without support.

2. Labor market and coping

The interviews underscore that most Roma migrants are dependent on precarious or informal employment: mainly cleaning, work in factories, or unregistered construction work. Women often juggle caregiving with domestic work, while men are more likely to be involved in other physical labor, often without contracts. These roles leave them without insurance, job security, healthcare in case of accidents, or access to formal welfare support:

> "My partner was working in a factory, and when they heard the war had broken out, they didn't get their wages" (displaced mother interviewee, Hungary).

> "The men are skilled, trained workers. But they have no security at all. One of the biggest issues is workplace accidents. People fall, get hurt, and injure themselves, but if they're working off the record, the employer just denies responsibility. You can't say you fell from the scaffolding or the roof because you weren't secured. And then they end up in the hospital, without social insurance. Either they're denied care, or they're treated and handed a bill. And

> in most cases, they're forced to pay it themselves." - Lead social worker in a church-based low threshold support office, Hungary

This connects to what Vincze (2023) and Kovai & Vigvári (2025) describe as the surplus population, useful only under highly exploitative conditions.

> "For work, I do reinforced concrete construction. That means when there's a big building project, we start at the foundation. We build the framework. Then the carpenters come in to set up the formwork, and after that, it gets filled with concrete. It's really, really hard physical labor. That's what I do. And honestly, I think it's the hardest job in the world, physically speaking. I got into it through people I know, some friends are already working in construction. I've been doing this for about three years now, since I came to Hungary. Before that, I worked as a general laborer and did all sorts of jobs. But this, this is the toughest." – Roma father and construction worker, Budapest

Coping strategies among migrant groups are embedded in structural and institutional contexts. This is particularly true for Roma migrants fleeing from Ukraine, who face multiple challenges due to racialization, poverty, and migration status. Coping under these conditions involves complex navigation. Many families rely on kinship-based pooling of resources, working together in brigades, informal economies such as group cooking or care-sharing, and maintaining contact with organizations they previously benefited from (Read and Thelen 2007). Such strategies are rational responses to a system that excludes them from formal integration pathways. These informal networks are also essential as a coping strategy, based on several interviews.

The interview findings also suggest that Roma migrants in Hungary experience a dual marginalization: first, as displaced persons, and second, as members of an ethnically stigmatized group, which resonates with Read and Thelen's (2007) concept of "neoliberal responsibilization," where individuals are expected to navigate systemic failure through personal resilience. Participants' reliance on informal kinship networks (Read and Thelen 2007) and intermittent NGO support underscores Zakariás et al.'s (2023) argument that coping strategies are increasingly multi-layered in the face of institutional withdrawal. Interestingly,

while local actors expressed solidarity, their efforts were often undermined by inconsistent state policies and a lack of coordination, a tension also observed in Anghel's (2023) study of Romanian policy frameworks. These results challenge how the refugee support system is seen and instead point to the policies that shape access to care.

3. Civil society support

> "We're here, we breathe together, cry together, laugh together, and stay up through the night for vigil together. But we're getting tired, deeply tired. There's no energy left, no resources. Still, we always come back to the same question: should we keep putting so much energy into this broken system? And the answer is yes: we have to. We go into every institution prepared for anything, because anything can happen during a daily casework when we accompany the families. And part of our job now is also supporting the staff within these public systems, being patient with them too, especially when they don't understand the situation or the state regulations." - Lead social worker, of a housing institution, Budapest

Civil society plays an undeniable role in filling the institutional gaps. Interviewees emphasized the importance of NGOs, faith-based organizations, social work and housing provider institutions, and volunteers in offering legal aid, language instruction, housing, and psychosocial support. Yet, this support is highly fragmented and often reliant on overburdened staff, and even quite different due to the location, funding, and type of organization. Several professionals described being emotionally and physically exhausted, pushed into "robot mode" (Interview Nr. 6, 7) to keep services running. Their work is vital, yet undercompensated and emotionally demanding. This reinforces Zakariás et al.'s (2023) argument that civil solidarity, while essential, is unsustainable with weak institutional backing.

4. Legal system and policies

> "What we observed is that they really do face more barriers in accessing services, even though many speak Hungarian, so it's not a language issue. A lot of the adults are illiterate, which makes administration difficult, and of course, prejudice remains a serious problem. And now, since last August when the new decree came into effect, Transcarpathia has been declared a region directly not impacted by war. It's no longer on the list of war-affected areas. That means people arriving from there, many of them children, have been completely

> excluded from state-supported housing. They've lost their access to shelter. […] According to the European directive on temporary protection, this is entirely unlawful. You cannot differentiate between people with the same protection status based on where they lived in Ukraine three years ago. You can't say one person qualifies for housing and another doesn't just because of that."- Legal advocate, NGO program lead, Budapest

The interview with the legal expert furthermore highlights a critical legal and ethical issue within Hungary's implementation of the Temporary Protection Directive, and this section is built on the narrative of that interview. Although Hungarian-Ukrainian dual citizens receive the same subsistence allowance as other temporary protection beneficiaries, their support is processed through a different authority. Despite this administrative difference, their circumstances are identical: they lack permanent residency in Hungary, have no pre-established lives or health insurance, and face the same vulnerabilities as other displaced individuals. However, the Hungarian state's current policy introduces discriminatory distinctions based on the applicant's previous residence in Ukraine. As of August 2024, access to subsidized housing is restricted only to those from officially designated "war-affected" regions, excluding individuals from areas such as Transcarpathia (Interview Nr. 4.).

This practice effectively undermines the core principles of the Temporary Protection Directive, which aims to provide equal treatment to all persons with the same protection status. By basing eligibility for essential services on geographic origin within Ukraine, Hungary creates unjustified disparities among protected persons. In contrast, countries like Poland apply time-bound but universal criteria for housing support, offering more predictable and inclusive assistance frameworks. The Hungarian model, by comparison, introduces arbitrary barriers at the point of access, such as determining eligibility based on prior residence at the very moment of arrival, further marginalizing already vulnerable populations.

Following the legislative shift that restricted state-supported housing to only a subset of temporary protection beneficiaries, many affected individuals submitted requests for exemption

or leniency. Out of 1,486 such applications, 1,202 were rejected by the Government Commissioner's Office (Interview Nr. 4.), without providing any justification or adhering to formal procedural requirements according to the expert. In response, legal action was taken to challenge these blank rejections. The office argued that such decisions were not administrative acts and therefore not subject to the same standards. However, both the lower court and, subsequently, Hungary's Supreme Court ruled that these were, in fact, administrative decisions and thus required legally valid, reasoned responses[4].

Despite this legal victory, the affected families remain in limbo without access to supported housing until the decisions are properly reissued. This situation highlights the stark asymmetry between a bureaucratic system with "seemingly unlimited time for litigation and procedural delays, and the urgent, daily housing needs of the vulnerable families involved" (Interview Nr. 4). As emphasized by the legal representative, such discriminatory differentiation between beneficiaries, based on subjective or bureaucratic reasoning, undermines the principle of equal access to rights under the Temporary Protection framework. With an estimated 30,000–40,000 protected individuals still in Hungary, the state remains obligated to ensure equal provision of services, regardless of origin or administrative pathway.

According to van Baar (2019), securitization in governance refers to the way marginalized populations are incorporated into state systems not as full and equal participants, but in ways that conditionally and selectively allocate rights, protections, and resources. This process creates legally recognized categories of inclusion while normalizing unequal access and deepening vulnerability through bureaucratic and racialized mechanisms (van Baar 2019). Drawing on Yuval-Davis's (2007) concept of multi-layered citizenship, this case exemplifies

[4] This refers to the legal obligation of the government commissioner to issue formally valid and well-reasoned administrative decisions in response to applications for equitable treatment. The ruling followed a court decision that deemed previous rejections as unlawful. https://helsinki.hu/a-kurian-nyertek-pert-a-karpataljai-menedekes-csaladok/

how intersecting social divisions shape unequal access to rights and reinforce exclusionary boundaries.

5. Social care

> "Those still in the system are drifting in an increasingly desperate situation. Some went back to Ukraine, others moved to Western Europe, and a few managed to find some stability. But the ones still here, or the ones we see, are often single mothers with many children, or people with serious illnesses or disabilities. It's the most vulnerable who remain trapped in the system." - Leader of a church-based housing support office, Hungary

> "They need social work support to even begin to catch up, to have a chance to settle their foot in society." - Lead social worker, of a housing institution, Budapest

The testimonies shared by housing and social work professionals echo broader theoretical critiques of contemporary welfare restructuring in Hungary. As observed by Read and Thelen (2007), the moralization of care and poverty governance under neoliberalism has created systems where access to basic support is conditioned on perceived deservingness. This is acutely felt in the Hungarian context, where Roma families and those who are multiply marginalized, such as single mothers or individuals with chronic illness, remain trapped in what Van Baar (2019) terms "anti-policies": interventions that in practice exclude. The quotation describing "those still in the system" (Interview Nr 2.) as the most vulnerable aligns with Keller and Virág's (2025) argument that Hungarian poverty management now functions as a mechanism of containment. Rather than expanding access or addressing structural inequality, the system increasingly targets behavior, offering limited support only when beneficiaries conform to narrow bureaucratic or moral expectations as in the case of Kocs[5] described by Helsinki Committee (HHC 2025) and interview members as well. The resulting exclusion is

[5] The portrayal of the case can be found in English here: https://www.dw.com/en/hungarys-government-makes-ukrainian-refugees-homeless/a-70026664

not incidental but embedded in a framework that shifts responsibility from the state to the individual, leaving many caught in cycles of dependency without genuine pathways to inclusion.

Recommendations from the interviewees

A universal access to care

> "As someone who works with refugees and migrants, I think the starting point itself is flawed, that we think in terms of refugee-specific systems instead of the national social care system. It's a mistake to build parallel structures. The Hungarian welfare state should be functional and inclusive enough to support anyone in crisis: Hungarian or not. Refugees shouldn't be a separate category. They shouldn't be managed through policing or immigration frameworks, but through a humanitarian lens." - Lead social worker in a church-based low threshold support office, Hungary

The current practice of developing parallel service structures for refugees, often managed by NGOs, faith-based groups, social institutions, or international donors, reflects a failure of sufficient help from the Hungarian welfare state to meet the needs of all residents. The expert interviews call for a paradigmatic shift: rather than sustaining fragmented, refugee-specific support, the national social system must be restructured to provide inclusive, universal access to care, housing, employment support, and social work.

In terms of housing, the recommendation is not for the return of closed camps or mass institutions, but for protected transitional or supported housing in urban or non-isolated rural areas, small-scale facilities with intensive social work support, available for a maximum of six months.

To bridge emergency needs and long-term stability, "exit housing or supported housing" (Interview Nr.6) models should also be scaled up, offering semi-independent apartments with flexible social support, especially during crises. This approach echoes the models used by some NGOs but requires state investment for scalability and sustainability.

> "The best solution is one where we can sit down with the family and look together at what would really help them, what kind of support would allow them to raise their children. Then we try to identify: which institution, which support system could actually provide that help? And we go through it all, step by step. These are families with very specific needs, and we have to examine each case individually, one by one." - Lead social worker, of a housing institution, Budapest

Finally, the interviews strongly argue that social work is the most effective tool for long-term inclusion. What refugees most often lack is not only resources, but information: how to navigate legal, cultural, and bureaucratic systems. Social workers offer not only guidance but consistent presence, emotional support, and the opportunity to co-develop life strategies.

In light of the prolonged displacement caused by the war in Ukraine, it is crucial to shift from emergency response to long-term integration planning. Current institutional responses in Hungary still operate under an ad hoc, crisis-oriented logic, with limited foresight into the post-crisis phase. Investing in children's development, particularly through inclusive education, psychosocial support, and stable housing, can serve as a foundation for broader family support. As several practitioners emphasized, "lifting the children" (Social worker, Interview Nr. 6) often uplifts entire families. To ensure meaningful inclusion, institutional preparedness must be strengthened through cross-sectoral coordination, long-term funding strategies, and policies that embed displaced populations within the national welfare, education, and child protection systems.

> "Since the beginning of the conflict, there has been no real coordination. Information sharing needs to be much better: not just with the clients, but also with the service providers they interact with: health care workers, schools, social workers at accommodation centers. The authorities and government need to ensure that everyone involved is on the same page. Right now, each service operates in isolation, and that makes the whole system fragile."- Legal advocate, NGO program lead, Budapest

A recurring theme in the interviews was the lack of centralized coordination, resulting in fragmented and overlapping service provision; as one respondent put it, "everyone wants to help," (Interview Nr. 7) but without clear role allocation, the same individual might receive

redundant support from four different organizations, an inefficient use of already limited resources.

Recommendations for further analysis

Several issues raised in the interviews point to areas that require deeper analysis in future research. Among these, housing insecurity and exploitation emerge as the most acute and urgent. Families are routinely forced into overcrowded, overpriced, and often degrading living conditions. Most interviewees highlighted these cases.

> "That conversation really shook me. Two mothers told me they were renting a shipping container for 200,000 forints a month. Next to it was just a pit toilet. One of the women said she couldn't even sleep at night because there wasn't enough space. She had to wait until her husband came home from work, rested, and only then could she try to sleep during the day. And for that, they deduct money from their wages, as if this were something acceptable to ask for." - Lead social worker, of a housing institution, Budapest

> "The place was in terrible shape. Run-down, old houses squeezed next to an abandoned factory, if you can even call them houses. Inside, the space was crudely divided with plasterboard panels, thin enough that every sound carried through. In some rooms, there weren't even curtains to offer privacy, people could see and hear each other without barriers and these are families with kids. And yet, these places were being rented out for 200 to 300 thousand forints. It's outrageous." - Lead social worker in a church-based low threshold support office, Hungary

These exploitative arrangements are often tied to informal labor markets run by private landlords who were described as "feudal lords" (Interview Nr. 2, 3.) The absence of state intervention in regulating these living conditions reflects what van Baar (2019) calls "humanitarian abandonment", which is a form of structural neglect that leaves marginalized populations to navigate unregulated and often predatory environments. This situation also resonates with E.P. Thompson's (1971) concept of the moral economy, used and presented by

Durst (2025), but the relationship between housing, labor, and moral logics requires broader theoretical and empirical exploration.

> "We knew immediately what this law would do. When the law came out, I knew right away, they targeted exactly the two pillars we were counting on. We had a plan. We thought large families, especially those with many small children, could settle in rural villages. There, they could live in garden houses, have enough space, kids could walk to school, and mothers could manage daily life more easily. The fathers, just like they used to do from Ukraine, could travel to work elsewhere in Hungary, commute from the countryside and earn money. But then they regulated who could move into small settlements and excluded both refugees and dual citizens. That whole strategy was dismantled overnight."
> - Lead social worker, of a housing institution, Budapest

This means there are other policies implemented in Hungary that can further restrict finding the right housing solution[6] for the Roma migrants, and it needs further analysis.

Another area in need of further inquiry is the impact of donor withdrawal and funding volatility. While some interviewees noted the withdrawal of support from international agencies, the long-term implications of these funding shifts on service continuity, staffing, and program scope have not yet been systematically studied. Understanding how civil society organizations can adapt to this volatility is essential for assessing the sustainability of current support structures.

The experiences of Roma men were notably underrepresented in the interviews. While women and children were often at the center of narratives, only one interview was conducted with a male participant due to working time during the interview process.

Concerns were also raised about NGO burnout and capacity limits. With civil society acting as a main support in the face of state withdrawal, questions arise about how long these

[6] Based on the proposed regulation for the protection of local self-identity, any city or village in Hungary may legally prevent new residents from settling in the municipality. This measure disproportionately affects displaced persons and vulnerable populations, including refugees and dual citizens, by restricting their housing options in smaller settlements. https://hvg.hu/360/20250430_hvg-onkormanyzatok-onazonossag-betelepulesek-korlatozasa-ingatlanpiac

organizations can sustain their work. High staff turnover, emotional fatigue, and funding pressures may all undermine the long-term viability of this support ecosystem.

Legal ambiguities, especially around dual citizenship, further complicate access to welfare and legal protections. Interviewees expressed concern about the misuse or misunderstood interpretation of these laws, leading to exclusionary practices in housing, employment, social support, and residency rights, which need further understanding.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

> "They say that as dual citizens, we are just like Hungarians here. And honestly, today, I'm grateful that we're not under refugee status. I hope this will turn out well, that there'll be time to prepare to move out, even for me. It's hard, of course, but you have to face it. That's how I see it: you have to face everything, stand up, be strong. We have children. We must be strong and keep looking forward. There's nothing else we can do, there's no going back. That's no life anymore." - Ukrainian Roma mother and his brother in a temporary shelter, dual citizen

This thesis has tried to understand the impact of the evolving Hungarian migration governance, particularly the August 2024 decree affecting housing support, on Roma migrants from Ukraine, with a focus on institutional practices, access to rights, and lived experiences. Drawing from nine in-depth interviews, document analysis, and field notes, the research traced the trajectory of humanitarian responses, social care provision, and emerging structural barriers, while situating these processes within broader theoretical frameworks.

Across the empirical material, several key insights have emerged. First, the Hungarian response to the Ukrainian conflict has been highly dynamic but also deeply fragmented. The 2024 policy reform created sharp distinctions based on prior residence within Ukraine, thereby withdrawing financial support from many Roma migrants from state-supported housing, despite their legal status and vulnerability.

Second, housing insecurity surfaced as the most acute and systemic issue. The forms of precarity expressed in interviews were worsened by the absence of affordable, inclusive housing options. Despite some efforts by NGOs and church-based organizations to offer transitional or supported housing, these solutions remained ad hoc, underfunded, and increasingly pressured by the withdrawal of international donors.

Third, labor market integration was marked by widespread informality, exploitation, and insecurity. While some migrants secured work in construction, cleaning, or factory labor, these

positions were often unregistered, leaving them without insurance or legal protections in case of injury or illness. Coping strategies were essential for survival, but insufficient to replace structural inclusion in the case of this vulnerable group.

Fourth, civil society actors, particularly NGOs and church-affiliated institutions, emerged as the de facto welfare providers. Their work was vital in delivering legal support, language training, trauma care, and social work. Yet, the burden placed on these actors led to widespread burnout. Interviewees described themselves as agents who need to simultaneously support clients and coach overwhelmed public service providers.

Fifth, migration policies were shown to be restrictive in spite of the core principles of the Temporary Protection Directive, which prohibit discrimination among beneficiaries.

Reflecting personally and professionally on this research process, I must highlight the emotional intensity and ethical responsibility involved in documenting the lived realities of displaced Roma migrants. I approached this study with both a critical lens and a deep commitment. This work has also deepened my understanding of how academic research can serve as a bridge between lived experience and policy advocacy. Policies must recognize Roma families not as "problems to be managed," but as new citizens deserving of stable housing, fair employment, and respectful social care.

In closing, the situation of Roma migrants from Ukraine in Hungary is not just a humanitarian concern but a reflection of deeper policy choices about who belongs, who is helped, and on what terms. The initial story of the displaced Roma mother represents the lived reality of many Roma families who crossed into Hungary with hope and fear, and uncertainty, now they face further uncertainty. However, the restrictive turn in Hungary's migration governance mirrors broader patterns of belonging.

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