A Model for Culturally Sensitive Digital Transformation of Non-governmental Organizations: A Case-study from Bulgaria

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Abstract

This paper aims to present a case-study from the Bulgarian non-academic sector developed in the frame of the STUDIES-DIG project funded by the EU. It is part of the project research seeking to explore the cultural, social, and institutional factors that shape digital transformation in higher education and related sectors, while also identifying future scenarios and tools to support sustainable innovation in multicultural contexts. The study examines the work activity of Arete Youth Foundation, whose goal is to develop the professional and personal potential of young people of Roma origin through education and it seeks to outline a model for culturally sensitive digital transformation of Roma NGOs in Bulgaria. It looks at various strategies aimed at integrating the Roma population in Bulgaria, focusing on the efforts of non-governmental organizations to empower Roma individuals through education. The case study offers grounded insights into challenges and opportunities faced by of a non-government organization led by representatives of the Roma community in Bulgaria and emphasizes local issues and context-specific modifications in digital transformation. The Roma minority is traditionally the most marginalised group in Bulgarian society and the paper reveals that in the context of digital transformation digital inequality cannot be addressed solely through technological solutions, but requires structural change, inclusive education, and cultural sensitivity. The lessons learned and best practices identified in the case study significantly enriches and enlarges the research under the STUDIES-DIG project.

Keywords: Roma community, NGOs, education, digitalization

1. Introduction

In the modern world access to technology is a key factor for social inclusion, education, employment, and personal development and is generally determined by the ability for individuals and communities to fully participate in a digital society through three key pillars - connectivity, hardware, and digital literacy. It is also "a socially conditioned process" in the worlds of M. Warschauer (2004), who argues that in today's society the ability to access, adapt, and create knowledge using information and communication technologies is critical to social inclusion. In simple terms, digital access requires not only hardware and literacy but also institutional support and social inclusion and these factors are often absent in marginalized groups. In the context of Bulgaria a significant portion of its population is represented by the Roma ethnic group that for long time has been facing social isolation and economic hardships and despite its rich cultural heritage and diversity there have been structural barriers related to poverty and financial obstacles, educational deficits, infrastructural and institutional challenges that hinder Roma communities' access to digital participation.

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In the context of increasing digitalization, the level of digital skills of the Bulgarian population remains very low. The fact that only 36% of the Bulgarian population possesses basic digital skills makes this the country's weakest link despite having one of Europe's best ICT sectors. The information presented by the Vice Minister of E-Government in the end of 2025 reveals that Bulgaria has a strong technological foundation and the most critical barrier is not technological or financial; it is human and cultural. Thus, the requirements for digital skills and general efforts to improve digitalization are targeted at the population as a whole and do not identify Roma as a priority vulnerable group. Similarly, data from the European Union website shows that only 35.5% of Bulgarians (aged 16–74) have basic digital skills, and among Roma this share is even lower — below 20%. The significant difference in basic digital skills and overall gap between the Roma commmunities and the general population create serious difficulties and additional challenges when applying for jobs, submitting documents electronically, or using digital services.

The limited progress of Roma integration in the past and the need to renew and step up the commitment to Roma equality, inclusion and participation at both European and national level forced the European Commission to adopt a new EU Roma strategic framework for the period up to 2030, promoting effective equality, socio-economic inclusion and meaningful participation of Roma. As the proportion of Roma, as well as their national contexts, varies considerably in each member state, the strategic framework sets out common objectives and targets at the EU level, which allows for a common but differentiated approach at the national level. Therefore, meeting the objectives of the strategic framework needs action at both EU and national level and it includes the involvement and partnership of Roma communities, national governments, EU institutions, civil society and, as well as industry and academia in the development of national Roma strategic frameworks.

2. Methodology of research

The present case study is based on qualitative methodological approach, which includes document analysis and observations. This approach allows for a detailed investigation and an in-depth understanding of the context and nuances of the issue being examined. A substantial part of the research is focused on the work activity of Arete Youth Foundation, whose goal is to develop the professional and personal potential of young people of Roma origin through education. The observation method is one of the primary methods used and it involves visiting the organization, which is the subject for the case-study. Through direct observations of the organization’s activities and programs, the training and support for young people of Roma origin, as well as the overall atmosphere in the learning environment, data was collected regarding the actual state of integration efforts. Alongside the collected data, additional information was also gathered through individual interviews with community leaders and site visits. On-site observation enables the identification of practical challenges and successful practices that may not be reflected in official documents and statistics. Insights and findings served to document a number of innovative approaches and solutions used by Arete Youth Foundation and to emphasize local issues and context-specific modifications in digital transformation of a civil organization led by representatives of the Roma community in Bulgaria. Another key method employed is the analysis of strategic documents and reports. For this purpose, a number of documents were reviewed and analyzed, including government strategies, reports from non-governmental organizations, and international studies. These documents provide valuable information about current policies and programs for the integration of the Roma, as well as the

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outcomes of their implementation. By reviewing these reports, key indicators of success and failure of various strategies were identified, along with obstacles to their effective implementation.

3. Overview of the Roma Integration during the transition period in Bulgaria

Roma people in Bulgaria are a significant minority. Based on different estimates the number of people of Roma origin is about 10 percent of the Bulgarian population and the Roma community is one of the most socio-economically vulnerable groups in Bulgaria despite the progress for inclusion of minorities that has been made after the political changes and economic transfromation from 1989. Indeed, the data collected in the late'90s by J.Tanaka for the report on "Roma in the Educational System of Bulgaria — A Problem Analysis" states that of an estimated 800,000 Roma in Bulgaria, about 8% are illiterate; 37% have a 4th grade education; 46% have completed primary education; 8% have finished secondary education, and less than 1% have university degrees. In 1999 the Bulgarian government approved the "Framework Program for Equal Integration of Roma into Bulgarian Society" and adopted a whole set of complementary documents to help implement it. The adoption of the document is the first important initiative to address systemic issues facing the Roma community in Bulgaria, including those in the field of education and to identify tasks to improve the overall situation of Roma in Bulgaria, particularly concerning deep-seated educational segregation. Administrative responsibilities for Roma matters have been concentrated in the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Demographic Issues (NCCEDI) under the Council of Ministers (later renamed) and the importance of this body has significantly increased after Bulgaria started the process of EU accession. The Council has been established as a government consultative body assisting in policy formation for minority integration, particularly focusing on Roma inclusion. It acts as a coordinator for state policies and functions as a platform for dialogue between state institutions and non-governmental organizations to promote equality, social inclusion, and non-discrimination. Furthermore, Bulgaria also developed the "Decade Action Plan 2005-2015" in the framework of the Decade of Roma Inclusion and in February 2005 hosted the official launch of the Decade of Roma Inclusion.

At present the main guidelines for the implementation of policies for socio-economic inclusion and participation of Roma are set out in the National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for Roma Equality, Inclusion and Participation (2021-2030), which has considered the lessons learned and has been built on the results achieved during the implementation of the National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for Roma Integration (2012-2020). The Strategy fits into the context of the development of European integration and inclusive policies and its goals are in line with the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. The Strategy has been developed in partnership and broad consultations with all stakeholders and after 2030 it may be continued, supplemented or amended, depending on the results achieved, the existing political, social and economic realities and new challenges. To facilitate and strengthen the adoption and impact of measures for equality, inclusion and participation of Roma, policies and programs have been developed to take into consideration the diversity of Roma communities in Bulgaria, applying specific approaches at the local level. In this context, it should be highlighted that for any policy or program it is important to consider and pay attention to the socio-economic dynamics of Roma communities, as well as the high level of diversity between communities, shown by their clear self-determination, location (urban or rural areas), culture and traditions.

The document analysis reveals that Bulgaria has established a positive overall legal framework for inclusion of minorities and has set up an integrated approach in the implementation of Roma inclusion and participation policies.



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Despite the significant progress on Roma inclusion, the Roma community still occupies the lowest level in the social hierarchy and the status of the Roma in the socio-economic aspect is dramatically lower than the Bulgarian average: high unemployment rate, deplorable living conditions, bad health, high illiteracy rate, etc. Unemployment among Roma is significantly higher than the national average and many Roma children do not have access to quality education, which greatly limits their opportunities for professional development and personal growth.

Many studies and reports indicate that ensuring access to quality inclusive education is a key to overcoming poverty and marginalization among Roma, because good education increases the chances of employment, reduces the risk of social isolation, improves access to healthcare and other services, and contributes to building a socially cohesive society. The 2025 case study by K. Makaveev, published by the ERGO Network, analyzes Roma access to education and lifelong learning in Bulgaria and examines systemic barriers, inclusive education practices, and training opportunities, reflecting on progress toward equitable education for the Roma community. A study conducted by R. Stoilova (2024) examines digital inclusion as a critical factor in modern social stratification, arguing that social-economic inequalities are essential to deepening the digital divide, because it is not just about technology but is deeply embedded in social and cultural structures. In the digital domain the socio-cultural inequalities include the material and cultural barriers before minority groups, women, elderly or disabled people and the dissemination and use of information technologies (IT) in a country depend on two basic factors: education and income. The study reveals the positive connection between income and educational level and identifies income inequalities as the leading factor of digital inequalities and its negative effect for significant groups in poverty. Stoilova's research also emphasizes that young people from Roma origin, with a lower level of education cannot fully utilize the advantages of digitalization, because of limited digital skills. They use mainly phones to communicate with relatives and friends through the Internet and not so much for finding well-paying jobs and realizing themselves professionally.

A number of studies reveal that digital inequality cannot be addressed solely through technological solutions, but requires structural change, inclusive education, and cultural sensitivity. A research done by K. Petkova (2025) finds out that access to technology and the internet is not merely an economic issue, but a process strongly shaped by social, cultural, and gender-related factors. Her analysis reveals the multidimensional nature of digital inequalities among young Roma women and identifies key dimensions of digital inequality as experienced by Roma women ranging from limited access to devices and educational deficits, through age-related and cultural barriers, to the importance of family and digital communication as sources of support. The study illustrates that digital literacy can serve not just as a tool, but as a pathway toward economic and social mobility, including successful professional integration into the IT sector and provides concrete guidance for the development of inclusive policies for vulnerable groups, particularly for Roma women. Therefore, bridging the digital divide within the traditional Roma cultural system requires policy development based on intersectional analysis and collaboration with Roma leaders and local initiatives, as well as digital education approaches tailored to cultural contexts and gender roles. The author concludes that targeted programmes for women should combine digital skill-building with empowering approaches, including women’s mentoring networks, mobile training initiatives, and culturally sensitive methodologies. In short, interdisciplinary interventions linking education, social work, and gender equality policy have the potential to address both the structural and normative barriers to Roma women’s digital participation.

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4.The Role of Roma NGOs in implementing integration educational programs

In Bulgaria a number of institutions and organizations with different competencies and capabilities have been involved in the implementation of the National Strategy for Equality, Inclusion and Participation of the Roma (2021-2030) in which education is identified as a leading priority. The Ministry of Education and Science (MES) is the leading responsible institution to implement the state policy for equal integration of Roma in the Bulgarian society through two global processes: inclusive education and educational integration as fundamental components for effective social inclusion of Bulgarian Roma citizens. The programs implemented by the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) such as "Education for All", "National Program for Supporting Students from Ethnic Minorities" and "Digital Education for All" aim to encourage the involvement of Roma students in the educational process and to foster their support through public-private partnerships and collaboration with NGOs, local authorities and international organizations. In fact, the level of collaboration relation and relation of Roma NGOs to the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) for implementing various educational programs is crucial, because they play various important roles acting as intermediaries, policy advocates, service providers, and monitors of educational inclusion for Roma students. In this regard, it is also worth mentioning that a Report published in 2007 by Roma Education Fund shows that about 600 Roma NGOs have been registered and funded by different donors to implement projects in various sizes and different spheres.

Nowdays there are a number of integration programs between Ministries of Education and Science (MES) and Roma NGOs under which targeted, collaborative projects, often supported by EU structural funds and/or national budget, have been effectively implemented. The Roma NGOs have had a significant role for improving literacy and educational achievements among Roma due their flexibility and personalized approach tailored to the specific needs of Roma communities, local community engagement and trust building. There is direct relation between the better educational outcomes and lower unemployment rates and improved healthcare among Roma communities, which ultimately contributes to economic growth and social stability. Recent publications highlight that investing in educational programs and social integration initiatives have long-term benefits for both the Roma community and society. A study conducted by E. Zhechkova (2024) gives a brief overview of the economic effects of the integration programs implemented by NGOs and MES. They include reduced social costs, increased workforce productivity and improved educational quality, which are crucial for successful integration of the Roma for Bulgaria's economic development and for reducing social disparities. At the same time the author pays attention to less effective programs such as "Digital Education for All", which do not justify the funds invested in them, because of the high costs and weak outcomes regarding the educational and social integration of Roma students. The aim of this program is to provide digital devices and internet to students from minority groups as well as to improve access to educational resources among students from this minority group. The main reasons for the program inefficiency and lack of progress in enhancing digital literacy among Roma students are connected with the lack of consistent training and support for both students and their families, infrastructural challenges and connectivity issues, limiting access to online resources and passive involvement of local authorities and communities, making it difficult to implement the program successfully. In brief, despite significant investments this program is an example for poor results and reduced impact. It has not achieved significant positive economic effects.



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5. Arete Youth Foundation as a model for culturally sensitive digital transformation of Roma NGOs

Recent studies and reports of national and international organizations indicate that a large proportion of Roma have much more limited access to vocational training and career development opportunities compared to members of other ethnic groups. One of the organizations that works most actively towards the integration of the Roma population in Bulgaria is Arete Youth Foundation. It was established by two Americans, former Peace Corps volunteers, who had the opportunity to work in Roma communities during their stay in Bulgaria and saw the need for providing additional educational opportunities to Roma and other disadvantaged groups in Bulgaria.

5.1 The mission of Arete Youth Foundation

The mission of Arete Youth Foundation is encoded in the name. The word “Arete” is derived from Greek meaning "be the best you can be" and reaching one's full human potential (AYF, 2025a). The organization, which is already well-recognized within educational and business circles in Bulgaria, was established in 2010. Since its foundation, its activities have been aimed at supporting the development of the potential of young people who face difficulties of an economic or social nature. The formation of active, educated and successful young people makes its contribution to the development of civil society, which inevitably affects the prosperity of the state. An indisputable merit of Arete Youth Foundation is its support for young people of Roma origin with high potential, who are conquering professional peaks in various fields, building themselves as responsible citizens, and are successful role models, evoking admiration, and serve as an inspiration for other young people. A guarantee for professional and personal success is good education and social engagement. This understanding motivates the foundation's team to dedicate their activities to supporting and encouraging educational activities and the inclusion of young people of Roma origin in various initiatives aimed at building them up as active and useful citizens of society (AYF, 2025a).

Arete Youth Foundation has reached 4,500 Roma youth and it is one of the few organizations in the country that maintain a Salesforce CRM database in order to track the progress of its pupils and students: 99.7% of the participants in the foundation's programs successfully finish high school and 60% continue their academic path at higher education institutions. By 2021, over 1,300 pupils had received information and counselling for continuing their education, as well as active support in the student application process. Since 2013 until now, through mentoring support from university professors, 590 Roma students have successfully adapted to a new for them academic environment. In total, about 98% continue their education and/or successfully graduate from higher education. As a result of the joint efforts, the foundation beneficiaries have become lawyers, medical doctors, engineers, teachers, social workers, entrepreneurs, and leaders of civic organizations.

5.2 Management Structures of Arete Youth Foundation and Levels of Digitalisation

The variety of activities and all programs of Arete YF in Bulgaria are carried out by a small but highly effective and motivated team. The total number of the organization’s staff is four people (AYF, 2025b). The team is led by Ms. Radostina Chaprazova, who is the executive director for Bulgaria and one of the female leaders from the Bulgarian nonprofit sector. She graduated from the American University in Bulgaria and worked for the Open Society Institute in Sofia. For more 20 years she has been gaining experience in the civil society sector, where she has mobilized resources and engaged in policymaking and advocacy for equal opportunities for vulnerable communities. Her work is supported by a financial director, as well as by two managers of the respective programs, who are the core of the organization's activities. The work of the Bulgarian team is supported by a Management Board, which includes individuals who are

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dedicated to the cause of "Arete". Furthermore, Arete Youth Council has been established and this body has been made up of motivated and active young people who are the future not only of the Roma community, but also the potential leaders of social change regarding integration and equality in all its dimensions. An innovative approach is the defining of positions and respective responsibilities of each member of the Youth Council. The Council is managed by a Chairperson and a Deputy Chairperson, as well as a Financial Officer and a General Secretary. Their activities are supported by Managers and Advisors in specific sectors that are key to the organization and have a high degree of usefulness for young people and the community as a whole. Managers and Advisors have been appointed in the areas of: "Initiatives and Events", "Health and Medical Education", "Marketing and Social Networks", "Erasmus Projects", "Partnerships" (AYF, 2025c).

Voting confidence in young people to take responsibility for certain tasks within the organization develops a number of skills and shapes their vision for working for the benefit of others and the community. In its activities, the Arete team relies on both personal meetings and contacts, as well as on the use of modern technologies and digitalization. Events are organized and held in person, but some of them are organized and held through various platforms. Some of the work meetings are held online, which provides speed and convenience for the participants. In addition, some of the events jointly with universities are held in a combined format- both online and in person at the higher education institution. An example of such an approach are the traditional meetings at the UNWE in Sofia, aimed at informing prospective students about the procedures and regulations for application and the opportunities for training in the various programs at the university. The first meeting is organized online with the participation of an expert responsible for the Student Application campaign and a lecturer from the university. Each of the students can ask their questions and receive personal consultation on matters of interest to them. The second meeting takes place at the university, where high school graduates visit key locations on site that are important for their motivation and awareness. Such common places to visit are, for example, the Document Reception Center, the University Library, the new university building K, the University Museum.

Digitalization is a very important element in the communication process of the team, students, scholarship holders, and partners of the organization. Some challenges have been identified at the level of digitalization of some of the pupils with whom the Arete team works, and efforts have been made to overcome them. For this reason, one of the goals is to provide modern equipment in the organization's office, which will be available to pupils, both for preparing their assignments and for developing their digital and presentation skills. Digitalization is also applied for feedback and effective communication on issues important to young people. Arete Youth Foundation encourages everyone who participated in the programs to write their own articles on topics that interest them, such as: education; holidays; early marriages; conducting interviews with role models; organizing a podcast with interesting guests and personalities, etc. The articles are published on the organization's official website and on its Facebook page with photos of the authors.

5.3 Sources of Support for Arete Youth Foundation

Support for Arete Youth Foundationcomes from various types of stakeholders such as business organizations and civil society structures. Traditionally, the mission of Arete Youth Foundations is recognized and supported by different business organizations and other non-governmental organizations and over the years sustainable partnership relations have been built with a variety of stakeholders. The Trust for Social Alternative Foundation is one of the key partners of Arete. For years, they have been striving to change lives and overcome poverty among vulnerable groups of citizens,

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with the goal of achieving educational and economic results. A special focus of the support provided by the Trust for Social Alternative Foundation is the Roma population and investing in their future (TSAF, 2025).

Over the past three years, support from Lidl Bulgaria has been crucial for the expansion of its activities. The cooperation between Lidl Bulgaria and Arete began a few years ago. This makes the company the first to consistently support the cause of equal access to education for youth from vulnerable groups. They implement a series of initiatives, including charity events and scholarship programs. By the end of last year, 55 students of Roma origin have been received support. In this sense, the cooperation goes beyond traditional donations, as Lidl employees actively participate as lecturers, mentors, and career consultants, thus providing their valuable practical experience. These relations have become an example of an effective partnership between business and the civil sector, which is based on trust, shared values, and long-term commitment leading to social change.

Other partners who support the activities of Arete are higher education institutions and secondary schools. Arete Youth Foundation works together with leading higher education institutions in Bulgaria in all fields of academic knowledge - economics, medicine, law, pedagogy, architecture and construction, etc. The organization's scholarship holders continue their education at higher education institutions, where under the Arete program, students are provided with a mentor who assists them both in the learning process and in their overall adaptation for successful completion of Bachelor's and Master's programs.

Three main areas of activity can be distinguished in the work of Arete Youth Foundation (AYF, 2025a) (Table 1).



Table 1. Arete Foundation areas of activity

Mentorship is the first pillar of its activity and it focuses on building a network of people willing to help and support others in their personal and professional development. A very strong aspect of the organization's activities is upbringing and uniting people who are determined to contribute to the success of others and thus support not only the development of the Roma community, but also of society as a whole.

Education is the second pillar. The organization's team supports motivated young people of Roma origin with excellent results to continue their education in bachelor's and master's programs at universities. The organization encourages the young people through information, consultations, organizing meetings with university professors, on-site visits to universities (campus visits),

The third pillar is focused on professional development. A successful transition of the young people from the educational environment to starting their professional development is an important goal of the organization. Among the measures that have been taken are the development of key skills and abilities, career counseling, meetings and joint

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initiatives with business organizations so that they can realize themselves in the professional field, chosen by them. The foundation collaborates with companies that offer jobs to the young people who have completed their education.

5.4 Programs Implemented by Arete Youth Foundation

The Arete team develops several programs that have sustainable results and high added value. Examples of such programs are: "Together Forward", "Information and Education Center", "National Camp for Girls", "UniYouth" (AYF, 2025d).

The program entitled "Together Forward" is an illustration of the innovative approach applied by the foundation. The program mission is for an increasing number of children of Roma origin to complete their secondary education and continue their studies at universities. Within this program, two national camps for youth aged 16-21 are held annually; activities aimed at supporting youth through peer-to-peer mentoring; conducting small group training for leaders; expansion of volunteering and organizing a camp for girls. The camp for Roma girls is one of its key initiatives. It is a three-day intensive program for young women (ages 16–25) focused on leadership, preventing early marriages, and navigating educational challenges. The national Together Forward Camps and Camps for Girls are unique in terms of the way through which they inspire and support young Roma from all over Bulgaria in their pursuit of high academic achievements. These camps promote self-knowledge and self-respect through the values, culture, and traditions of the Roma community; they help the participants develop their social and leadership skills, build a culture of mutual aid and volunteerism, find ways to overcome gender inequality, discrimination, and hate speech. The effectiveness of these initiatives is proven by the organization's data, which shows that almost 100% of those who went through them complete their secondary education. The component programs are presented in Table 2.

All these activities seek to achieve the following goals: increasing awareness and knowledge, developing social (soft) skills, increasing motivation for learning and strengthening the identity and self-confidence of the young people of Roma origin. Within the program, a number of additional general activities are also carried out, aimed at raising the level of education and successful realization of young people of Roma origin (AYF, 2025d).

Together Forward		
National Camp "Together Forward"	Peers helping peers	Volunteer network

Table 2. Subprograms of "Together Forward"

Another key program of the Arete Foundation is the Information and Education Center (AYF, 2025e). Within this program, there are several sub-programs that are aimed at achieving its overall goal: to increase the number of young people of Roma origin who continue their studies at higher education institutions and successfully complete their academic education. To achieve this goal the main tasks for the team are to motivate strongly young people to study at

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university, which begins with correctly choosing a desired bachelor's program or building upon it with a master's program. Additionally, it is important to build sustainable relationships between the students involved in the organization's activities and the academic mentors selected for them. The academic mentoring program was launched in 2013 with 30 Roma students and 15 mentors. The data collected shows that for a period of 10 years, from 2014 to 2024, the number of university professors who mentored students were between 20 and 25 each year from at least 13 leading universities in the country. In each of these ten consecutive academic years, 50 young people of Roma origin were mentored. The findings for 2019/2020 academic year indicate that 25 university professors from 16 leading Bulgarian universities mentored 50 students of Roma origin. All activities within the program are aimed at encouraging and supporting young people of Roma origin to realize their potential in an academic environment, which should result in their professional development and personal growth (AYF, 2025d). Their personal success is a powerful inspiration aand a good example for other young people from the Roma community as well (Table 3).

Information and Education Center		
Academic mentoring	University visits	Scholarship program

Table 3. Subprograms of the Information and Education Center1

Last but not least, it should be highlighted the partnership with the America for Bulgaria Foundation (ABF), which started in 2010. With the support of the ABF and the Trust for Social Achievement, a program entitled Opportunities for Roma Leadership, Education, and Success has been running nationwide for years. As a result of this partnership the Arete Youth Foundation was able to develop and showcase a new model of working with Roma youth in Bulgaria outside the formal education system. This model in the words of R. Chaprazova "supports high school students through all stages of their academic and career development, helping them improve their social skills, boost their academic aspirations, reduce the consequences of social stigma, increase their sense of belonging, develop more ambitious and better focused professional goals, enhance their knowledge of national and European civil and political development". In short, this model has been designed to help strengthen their role as drivers of public and social change both locally and nationally.

In summary, the story of Arete Youth Foundation clearly outlines a model of many inspiring success stories featuring young people of Roma origin. Each of its programs and initiatives has been developed in response to the needs of the young Roma people to ensure their long-term positive effect. They have been designed to motivate, train, support, mentor and mobilize tomorrow's leaders, role models, and trained professionals who will responsibly serve their communities and society. The educational and academic achievements of Arete Youth Foundation are due to the dedicated and professional work with the young people of Roma origin. Along with holding a number of in-person events with pupils, students and partners in recent years, the organization relies on digitalization and new technologies,

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to successfully operates high-impact projects designed to increase high school graduation rates and provide leadership training.

Conclusion

This case study illustrates that achieving equality, inclusion and participation of the Roma requires the cooperation of all involved institutions at national, regional and local level in partnership with civil society and the full participation of the Roma in this process. Despite all integration policies and programs adopted at national and international levels, the Roma still represents the most vulnerable and disadvantaged ethnic community in Bulgaria and the majority of them live in poverty, social exclusion, and discrimination. Due to the low economic status, the widening social disparities and the lack of support, access to information and opportunities, many young people of Roma origin cannot meet the challenges of modern society as they drop out of school and get trapped in the vicious circle of long-term unemployment and inactivity.

Investing in educational programs and social integration initiatives have long-term benefits for both the Roma community and society. The Roma NGOs have had a significant role for improving literacy and educational achievements among Roma due to their flexibility and personalized approach tailored to the specific needs of Roma communities, local community engagement and trust building. There is a variety of NGOs dedicated to empowering youth from the Roma community in Bulgaria and one of them is Arete Youth Foundation. Its mission is to build sustainable social networks that encourage educational pursuits, foster a culture of responsibility, and promote professional development through mentorship.

Over the years Arete Youth Foundation has created and developed a new model of working with Roma youth in Bulgaria outside the formal education system, which has proven to be outstandingly relevant and successful. This model supports and promote self-knowledge and self-respect through the values, culture, and traditions of the Roma community, helping the beneficiaries to develop their social and leadership skills and building a culture of mutual aid and volunteerism. In order to ensure long-term positive effect each of the foundation's programs and initiatives has been designed in response to the needs of the young people of Roma origin. Furthermore, each of its programs has a role to play in creating a robust network. Mentorship plays a critical role in personal and professional growth and academic mentorship has been a key program of the foundation. Indeed, all key programs and projects for supporting Roma youth at different stages of their development have been designed to motivate, train, support, mentor, and mobilize tomorrow's leaders and role models, who will responsibly serve their communities and society.

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