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# POSITIVE DISCRIMINATION<sup>1</sup> IN PROVIDING ACCESS TO ROMANIAN HIGHER EDUCATION – THE EXPERIENCE OF SPECIAL STUDY PLACES FOR ROMA

## A b s t r a c t

The Romanian public higher education system faced various challenges and changes after the fall of communism in 1989, being expanded, reshaped and reorganized. In terms of accessibility, the expansion of the higher education system offered certain opportunities to various social categories, yet a certain level of inaccessibility due to economic aspects still represents a limiting factor.

In higher education, affirmative action was considered to be the proper measure to address the inequalities and discrimination faced by the Roma communities. The first measure that can pass as affirmative action after the fall of communism in Romania was the initiative of the Department of Sociology and Social Assistance of the University of Bucharest in the 1992-1993 academic year, when 10 dedicated places for students from Roma communities were offered. In the years following, more universities started reserving places for Roma students. In 1998, those individual actions of various university Departments of Sociology and Social Assistance were translated into a Ministry Decree. The Education Ministry Decree 3577 introduced the idea of dedicated places for people belonging to Roma ethnicity in Romanian universities in various fields of study.

Since 1998, the total number of the Roma population enrolled in higher education in dedicated places has grown steadily, with some episodes of regress (Duminică, 2023, 23). The highest number of Roma students enrolled in dedicated places was reached in 2018, with a total number of 618 students enrolled in a bachelor degree. The 2018-2019 academic year registered a significant decline in the total population of Roma students enrolled in dedicated places, reaching only 286 persons in the 2020-2021 academic year (Duminică, 2023, 23).

While access to higher education increased for the Roma population once the legal context for affirmative action in higher education was developed, the proportion of Roma people with a university degree

remains very low - around 2% in 2018. In comparison, the proportion of the Romanian population with a university degree was around 22% in 2018 (Duminică, 2023, 7). The 2021 census revealed that out of a population of almost 500 000 people, only around 90 000 Roma people were eligible to enroll in university programs, and only around 9000 actually graduated university (Census, 2023).

According to the same Census, 70% of the Roma population dwells in rural areas, while 30% lives in urban areas. Of the total Roma population that received no education or abandoned after primary or secondary school more than 70% are from rural areas. Thus, since 50% of the total Roma population enrolled in university programs originates from rural areas, it follows that rural Roma population tends to be under represented in the higher education system.

While access to higher education for the Roma population was slightly improved by the affirmative measure implemented by the Ministry of Education, economic factors play a crucial role in accessibility of higher education system. The relation between dedicated places for Roma students and other factors influenced economically, such as medium of origin, is explored in this milestone, in order to analyze the accessibility of Romanian higher education in the post-communist period.

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<sup>1</sup>The term affirmative action is more appropriate and less negatively loaded than “positive discrimination”