



## How do Students Perceive their Non-Traditional Peers at Romanian and Hungarian Universities?

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*Emese Beata Berei*<sup>27</sup>

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### Abstract

Starting from a student-centre educational policy research approach (Kozma 2009, ESU 2012), this paper is discussing issues linked to the concept of equity in higher education in two EU member countries, Hungary and Romania. I analyse the way of looking at non-traditional students, confronting the policy conceptions with the students' perceptions. My objective was to explore the collegial attitude of students toward their non-traditional peers and to define specific types of preferences. The first part of the study is an overview of the higher educational policy in Romania and Hungary, aiming to find out what kind of chance equality and compensation practices do they put into effect, and identify similarities and differences between them. It can be concluded, that their use of concepts is different, but the problems are to a large extent the same: disadvantages background, disability, national minority status or being a foreign student. The second part of the research is based on empirical data from two surveys of student population conducted by CHERD-Hungary in the cross border region in 2012 (N=2618) and 2014-2015 (N=1536). I studied from comparative perspective the student attitude of acceptance/ rejection toward non-traditional peers adapting the four grades Bogardus social distance measuring scale and using a statistical program to analyse data. Based on the policy analysis, the supporting attitude was measured on three dimensions: the attitude toward financial support, the attitude towards non-financial support and personal contact, divided in three possibilities, considering the intensity of the relationship. The hypothesis was based on previous research outcome related to the cross border area (Pusztai and Szabo 2014), that students' way of looking at non-traditional groups is not homogeneous. The results of my paper confirm this, both type of attitude are present on two sides of the border: students are most supporting towards their economically disadvantaged colleagues and less supporting with their Roma peers. Also I concluded that student perceptions have any latent structure. I identified the following three approach/attitude factors: internal ethnic difference/Roma, economic disadvantage/disabilities and the foreign factor. It can be seen that students' way of looking differs from the outlook of the educational laws: within the student community, the perception of Roma is the same perception of any other minority/ethnically different student group, while in the Romanian legal system Roma students are mentioned marginalized group.

**Keywords:** policy of equity, non-traditional students, student attitude, Romania and Hungary

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<sup>27</sup> University of Debrecen, Debrecen (Hungary), Email address: emeseberei@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0002-5436-6310

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## Context

This study is based on a research made in the cross-border region of the two neighbouring countries, Romania and Hungary. In both countries the population belongs to more than one nationality.

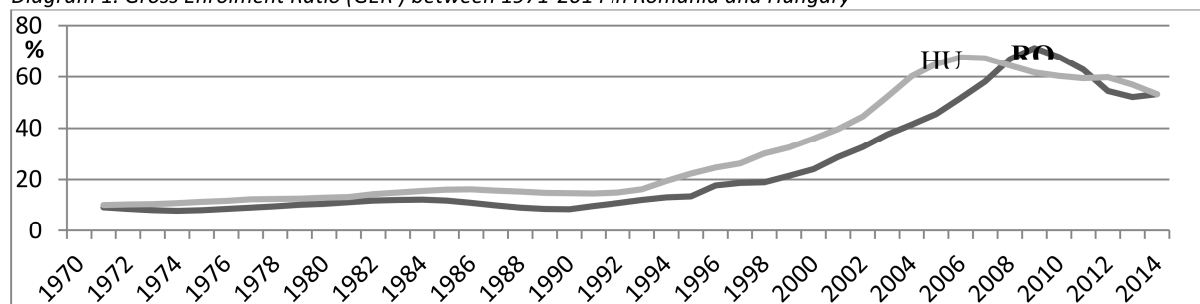
Table 1. The demographical characteristics in Romania and Hungary according to the 2011 census data

	RO <sup>28</sup>	HU <sup>29</sup>
<b>Total number of population</b>	20, 1 million	9,8 million
<b>Population structure by ethnic belonging</b>	88,9,% Romanians 6,5 % Hungarians 3, 3% Roma (according to non-official data 9, 19%) 1,3 other	93,5% Hungarians 3, 2% Roma (according to non- official data 7, 04 %) 3,3% other

Romania and Hungary are two post-socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Hungary and a part of Romania (Transylvania region) were a part of the Austro - Hungarian Empire, strong influenced by the German education and training system, with early selection and dual system of vocational training, the proportion of the early school leavers is lower than in other EU countries. Romania's secondary education combines both general and vocational elements and the early school leaving rates is comparatively higher than in the rest in EU, researchers argue that the main of the reason is the higher proportion of Roma youth, excluded from the education system (Kogan 2008).

In both countries, after the II World War the communist system of Soviet type determined the character of higher education. As the result of the post-communist systemic change, a new educational reform started, the higher educational population quickly expanded and after the turn of millennium the Bologna system with three levels in higher education was duly introduced.

Diagram 1. Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER ) between 1971-2014 in Romania and Hungary



Source: [http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR?locations=HU&name\\_desc=false](http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR?locations=HU&name_desc=false)

<sup>28</sup> National Institute of Statistics (2013). *Press Release. No. 159 of July 4th, 2013 on the final results of Population and Housing Census- 2011* (demographic characteristics of population). Source: [http://www.insse.ro/cms/files/statistici/comunicate/RPL/RPL%20rezultate%20definitive\\_e.pdf](http://www.insse.ro/cms/files/statistici/comunicate/RPL/RPL%20rezultate%20definitive_e.pdf). (Accessed: 2016. 06 23.)

<sup>29</sup> Kozponti Statisztikai Hivatal (2013). *2011.Evi Nepszamlalas. 3. Orszagos adatok.*[Population Census.3. National Data 2011.] Source: [http://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xftp/idoszaki/nepsz2011/nepsz\\_orosz\\_2011.pdf](http://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xftp/idoszaki/nepsz2011/nepsz_orosz_2011.pdf). (Accessed: 2016. 02. 02.)

EUROSTUDENT's newest data concerning the students' social and economic situation show in both countries a growing number of students with disadvantaged family background or living with disability.

Table 2. Non-traditional students in higher education in the two studied countries

Students indicators	RO	HU
Parents with lower social standing <sup>30</sup> (%)	32	25
Father with low educational background <sup>31</sup> (%)	7,9	3,8
Mother with low educational background (%)	7,6	4,9
Father with low occupational <sup>32</sup> status (%)	0,7	0,9
Mother with low occupational status (%)	0,7	0,7
Students with impairments (%)	6,8	7,8

Source: EUROSTUDENT V Database. Social and Economic Conditions of Student Life in Europe 2012-2015:  
<http://database.eurostudent.eu/>

Starting from the aspect, that students are main actors in educational process and policy makers (Kozma 2009, ESU 2012), in the following chapters I will discuss the equity concept in a twofold perspective: on the one hand at the level of national legislations, and on the other hand at the level of students, confronting the policy conceptions with the students attitude.

### **Policies of Equity in Higher Education as Reflected in National Educational Laws**

In this chapter I would like to discuss in comparative perspective the legal provisions regulating higher education in Romania and Hungary, in order to find out what non-traditional student categories are mentioned and what kind of equity chance (equality and compensational practices) are included in the national law.

In Romania, such references are included both in the Law of National Education (1/2011) and in the Children Protection Act (272/2004) . However none of the two laws includes a definition of what is meant by disadvantaged situation. The provisions concerning higher education are integrated in the Educational Law without being a separate unit. In the third part of the document several general principles are included, such as the principles of equitability, consultation with social partners and student centred education.

Further, paragraph 2 is prohibiting every kind of discrimination related to age, nationality, gender, social background, political, religious or sexual tendency, except the situations explicitly mentioned by law. The persons with physical impairment are mentioned only once in the document: physically hindered students are legally entitled to have unimpeded traffic opportunities inside the institutions of higher education and unrestricted access to all activities.

In section 205, paragraph 6, speaks about assuring supported budgeted places for students coming from the edge of society. Here are mentioned the Roma students, those

<sup>30</sup> Subjective assessment of social standing on 10-point scale

<sup>31</sup> Elementary education group

<sup>32</sup> Elementary occupational groups

coming from the villages and those from towns with less than 10 thousand inhabitants. In chapter 12, related to financing of higher education, the Law states that students are entitled to social support scholarships if they come from a family background with low income, orphan students and those coming from child protection system. The amount of scholarship is decided yearly by the university senates and shall cover the student's meals and accommodation costs. Institutionalized students have right for free transport, students coming from low income family backgrounds, institutionalized and foreign Romanian nationalities have financial and accommodation support.

Students with ethnic minority backgrounds in Romania have right to study in their own language at all level of education, article 45 – 47 referring at the circumstances and conditions.

Analysing the implementation of equity related policies within the Romanian institutions of higher education, Jamil et al. (2014) found that though the Romanian government's educational policy has aimed in 2013-2016 to assure social equitability, it didn't work out a strategy concerning the social dimension of the higher education. There is no legal provision stating which groups are underrepresented in higher education and doesn't exist a plan for putting compensatory measures into practice. Using the available information, he had identified underrepresented groups as it follows: children of parents with low income, students from villages, and persons with disabilities, Roma students, students who simultaneously work and learn.

In Hungary, since 2007 is in force a legal provision which consolidated the compensation practice in entering higher education for economically disadvantaged high school graduates, those living with disabilities and also for candidates for university admission, who have children in care (Kiss 2016). Currently, Hungarian higher education is regulated by the CCIV Law of 2011. The Law states that the senates of higher educational institutions shall establish a permanent committee to handle the students' social problems.

Part 4, chapter XI of the Law, which refers to the legal relations and obligations of students, states in paragraph 41's first line that persons in disadvantaged or cumulated disadvantaged situation, living with disabilities, belonging to national minorities, or with children in care are assured equal opportunities in both entering higher education and studying at higher educational institutions. At the same time the second line of the same paragraph emphasizes that in order to graduate students have to accomplish the learning requirements.

The Law of Higher Education defines disadvantaged student by reference to the Child Care Law : it is disadvantaged the person who is of age under 25 when entering into higher education and who is disadvantaged under the provisions of the Child Care Law. Disadvantaged students might have parents with elementary education, with low occupational status, segregate living place or unfavourable living conditions. Students coming from the state children/youth care system are considered persons with

cumulated disadvantage. At the same time, the Law of Child Care provides special measures of protection to children/youth with disabilities, in order to enhance their equality of chances and integration into society (V. Gonczi 2015). The persons with disabilities are regarded by law as a distinct category. Those who have more than one disability fall in the category of cumulated disadvantaged persons.

Further, I had studied what kind of compensational practice had put into effect the Hungarian Law of Higher Education in the case of non-traditional student groups. According to legal provisions, the compensational practice has two aims as it follows:

- in the process of admission in higher education the special student groups are supported by gaining extra points, scholarships and are waived from admission fee
- during the learning period, disadvantaged students receive financial supports such as scholarships or various refunds.

Roma are not defined as a special group by the Law, so this category is not among those entitled to receive compensations. The person who belongs here has compensational support if he or she is economically disadvantaged, cumulated disadvantaged, living with disabilities or with children in care. The Roma are mentioned in the Law only in connection with Roma vocational colleges. The Law secures that the foreign students from EU countries have right to study in Hungarian higher educational institutions and to compete for state scholarships under the same conditions as the Hungarian students.

At the same time, the Law provides advantage to foreign students having Hungarian nationality (most of them ethnic Hungarians from neighbour countries). Students with children in care are also given preference. They obtain extra points during the admission process and they are also offered financial support during their studies. There are also special scholarship programs offered by the Hungarian government which helped to great extent the economically disadvantaged, cumulated disadvantaged and Roma students to enter and finalize higher education (Szemerszki 2016).

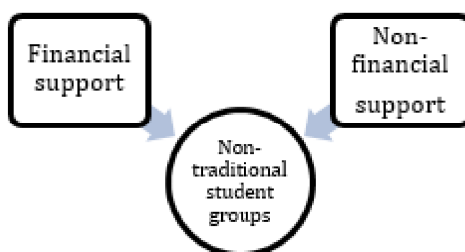
Summarizing the characteristics of the legal provisions in Romania and Hungary, it can be concluded that their use of concepts is different in the two countries, but the problem formulation is the same: low income, marginalised living area, disability, cumulated disadvantages background, both referring to nationality and foreigner students also (table 3.). The Romanian legal system does not define the economically disadvantaged, cumulated disadvantaged or other categories which require support, only mentions some key concepts and principles. In contrast, the Hungarian legislation has evolved constantly since 1993, and defines precisely the basic notions and their parameters, having a strong cooperation with the Child Care System.

Table 3: Non-traditional students groups in Hungary and Romania in the perspective of the law

	RO	HU
<b>Non-traditional student groups mentioned in educational laws</b>	-students with low income family background -marginalised living area background -students from child care system -students with disabilities -minority students -Roma students -foreign students	-economically disadvantaged students -cumulated disadvantaged students -students with disabilities -students with different national affiliation -foreign students -students with children in care

The concept of compensation in higher education is different in Romania and Hungary but has also commonalities: special students are supported financial or non-financial in both countries.

Diagram 3: Non-traditional students' compensation in Romanian and Hungarian legislation



Designed by the author

### Research Approach, Method and Questions

Besides governmental organizations, students are also among the stakeholders who shape the educational policy (Kozma 2009, ESU 2012). Taking into account the importance of this fact, in the following part of the paper I will refer to the outcome of my research concerning student attitude towards their peers belonging to non-traditional groups.

In order to avoid ambiguities or misinterpretations, it is important to reach a definition of what I mean by non-traditional students. For the purposes of current research by non-traditional students I understand those students who are in one or more of the following situations: economically disadvantaged family background, living with disabilities, being Roma, living in national minority situation or foreign students. In this study I will not be occupied with the special situation of students with children in care, or other groups.

The quantitative international survey data to be used in the following analysis was collected and made available by the Higher Educational Research Centre of the University of Debrecen, Hungary, in 2012 and 2014-2015, by HERD (Higher Education for Social Cohesion Cooperative Research and Development in a Cross – border Area Project HURO/0901/253/2.2.2.), by TESSCEE (Teacher Education Survey in Central and Eastern Europe) SZAKTARNET (TAMOP – 4.1.2.B.2-13/1-2013-0009 - Professional Service and

Research Supporter of the Regional Teacher Training Network in North Hungary) and by IESA (Research Application of the University of Debrecen RH/885/2013).

Table 4: The higher education institutions involved in research by year of data income and country (N)

	Higher education institutions	HERD 2012.	IESA 2014-2015
<b>RO</b>	University of Oradea	714	15
	Partium Christian University in Oradea	407	40
	Emanuel University in Oradea	136	-
	Babes – Bolyai University	66	138
	Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania	-	126
<b>HU</b>	University of Debrecen	1118	1061
	Debrecen Reformed Theological University	25	22
	College of Nyiregyhaza	152	134
	<b>Total number of students</b>	<b>2618</b>	<b>1536</b>

Source: HERD 2012 and IESA 2014-2015

The research tried to reveal what means of support do the students think proper in connection with their special student-mates and what patterns can be identified in students' attitude towards the special groups. Moreover, I studied from comparative perspective the student attitude of acceptance/ rejection toward non-traditional peers.

Based on the policy analysis, the supporting attitude was measured on three dimensions: the attitude toward financial support, the attitude towards nonfinancial support and personal contact (acceptance of living together). Adapting the four grades Bogardus social distance measuring scale, the personal contact was divided in three possibilities, considering the intensity of the relationship: I charted to what extent students are willing to have fellow student, flatmate or marital relationship with their mates belonging to non-traditional groups.

During the investigation I used chi-test and factor analysis to understand student attitude in connection with the special student groups.

## Research Results

### *Student Supporting Attitude towards Non-Traditional Peers*

In the first stage of the research, I used the database HERD 2012 and tried to reveal what supporting forms the students think about in connection with special students. I studied the student attitude towards non-traditional peers in relation to three dimensions: acceptance/non-acceptance of relationship, financial support and nonfinancial support. Based on the results of the research by Pusztai and Szabo (2014) who first examined in Hungarian context the higher educational student attitude towards their fellow students living with disabilities, I supposed that the students' way of looking at students belonging to special groups is not homogeneous, students think differently about the different special peer groups.

Table 5: Special students in student environment (N=2618) (%)

Do you have among your peers?	RO	HU
students with disabilities	11,5	22
national minority students	32	36

Source: HERD 2012

According to the opinions expressed by students, the special group they encounter most often in their student community environment is that of national minority students. In Hungary, students with disabilities are represented within student population in higher proportion compared to the situation in Romania.

Table 6: Higher education students with disadvantaged family background (%)

Students indicators	HERD 2012		IESA 2014-2015	
	RO (N=1323)	HU (N=1295)	RO (N=323)	HU (N=1226)
Father with low educational <sup>33</sup> background (%)	29	36	36	36
Mother with low educational background (%)	29	20	31	22
Father with low occupational status <sup>34</sup> (%)	29	20	21	15
Mother with low occupational status (%)	34,5	17,5	27	18
Parents with lower social standing <sup>35</sup> (%)	12	17	23	21

From analysing the students' demographical data (table 6.) I concluded that students who are disadvantaged due to their family background (the parents' low schooling level, their lack of employment or the low social standing of parents) are present more than 10 % in both countries. Fonai (2012) analysing the HERD 2012 database, concluded that students with low socioeconomic status were 23, 7% in Hungary and 42, 2% in Romania Universities. Altogether, I considered that the numerical representation of non-traditional students is high enough that the students may formulate their supporting/ non-supporting attitude in connection with their student-peers having special characteristics. Concerning to presence of foreign students we have no empirical data and for this reason I will not formulate conclusions related to them.

Studying student attitude according to the three mentioned dimensions, I came to the result that compared to Hungarian peers, students from Romania are more supportive towards any kind of special peer group. In both countries, higher educational students are the most supporting towards the economically disadvantaged and the less supporting toward the Roma group. The difference between the two countries appears mostly in relation with the Roma and the national minority group: students from Romania are significantly more supporting with the Roma in respect of supporting them financially (OR=3,1), non-financially (OR=2,2) and of accepting to have relationship with them (OR=1,8).

<sup>33</sup> Elementary education level (IESC 1-3)

<sup>34</sup> No employed

<sup>35</sup> Subjective assessment of social standing on 10-point scale

In connection with their peers living with negative drawbacks – economically disadvantaged situation or disability – students agree more with financial and non-financial forms of support than with having relationship.

Table 7: Would you accept if you were a flatmate or if he/she would get non-financial or financial support one of the students belonging to the following groups: Roma, national minority/ living with disabilities/economically disadvantaged/ foreign students? (I summarized the proportion of students who totally reject or rather reject) (N=2618)(%)

Non-traditional student group	Flatmate			Non-financial support			Financial support		
	RO	HU	OR	RO	HU	OR	RO	HU	OR
Roma	43	58***	1,8	25	43***	2,2	25	51,5***	3,1
National minority	23	32***	1,5	18	30***	1,9	21	39***	2,3
Living with disabilities	25,5	33,5***	1,5	13,5	14	1	13	15	1,1
Economically disadvantaged	14,5	18*	1,3	12	12	0,9	11	13	1,1
Foreign	13	19***	1,5	15	27***	2	18	35***	2,3

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$  \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$

Source: HERD 2012

### **Perceptions of Social Distance and Connectional Support towards those Belonging to Different Special Groups**

According to the research by UNICEF (2014), in the countries which belonged to the Eastern Bloc, beside the lack of financial resources, the lack of relationships and social networks is also a problem faced by children and youth. That is why my research on attitude towards non-traditional peers touched on the subject of social distance and connectional support.

I studied the connectional attitude according to three dimensions: acceptance/non-acceptance of fellow student, flatmate and marital relationships. The data (table 7.) show that students are the most supportive towards the economically disadvantaged groups and the less supporting towards the Roma students. The difference between the Hungarian and Romanian minority students is the highest in connection with attitude toward national minority students. The students from Romania support the fellow student (OR=3,8), the flatmate (OR=4,8) and the marital relations (OR=3,3) with ethnic minorities to a greater extent than the students from Hungary, which can probably be explained by the fact that most students in Romania are themselves minority members.

Concerning the level of acceptance of the fellow student relationship, I found that the students from Romania are more supportive than the students in Hungary in the case of any special group. They are two times more inclined to accept economically disadvantaged peers as fellow students (OR=2) and more than 2.5 times more ready to have supporting attitude towards the students with disabilities.

Table 8. Would you accept if you were in fellow student/flatmate/ in marital relationship with one of the students belonging to the following groups: Roma/ national minority/ living with disabilities/economically disadvantaged/foreign students (I summarized the proportion of students who totally reject or rather reject) (N=1549)(%)

Non-traditional student group	Fellow student			Flatmate			Marital relationship		
	RO	HU	OR	RO	HU	OR	RO	HU	OR
Roma	18	23,5*	1,4	55	60	1,2	81	79,5	0,9
National minority	4,5	15***	3,8	13	41***	4,8	26	54***	3,3
Living with disabilities	5,5	13***	2,6	27	38***	1,6	67	67,9	1
Economically disadvantaged	4	8*	2	12	17*	1,4	34	38	1,1
Foreign	3	8**	3.2	9	20***	2.4	25	38***	1.8

Note: \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$  \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$

Source: IESA 2014-2015

Focusing on the fellow student relationship, I also examined whether student perceptions have any latent structure. The factor analyses revealed that according to the student attitude toward national minority, ethnically different or Roma students form together a first factor, economically disadvantaged or living with disability students belong to a distinct group thus forming a second factor, while the foreign students create a third factor.

Table 9: Student perceptions towards non-traditional fellow student groups<sup>36</sup>

Non-traditional student group	Perceptions of national minority, ethnically different, Roma students	Perceptions of economically disadvantaged, living with disabilities	Perceptions of foreign students
National minority	0.862		
Ethnically different	0.741		
Roma	0.626		
Economically disadvantaged		0.772	
Living with disabilities		0.660	
Foreign			0.857

Source: IESA 2014-2015

Thus I identified the following three approach/distance factors: internal ethnic difference, economic disadvantage/disabilities and the foreign factor. It can be seen that students' way of looking differs from the outlook of the educational laws: within the student community, the perception of Roma is the same perception of any other minority/ethnically different special student group, while in the national legislations Roma students are not mentioned at all. The way of looking at students with negative drawbacks – being in economically disadvantaged situation or living with disabilities – resembles the provisions of the Hungarian law offering compensatory advantages to these categories in entering higher education. The way of looking at foreign students appears to be distinct from the perception of ethnically different or Roma fellow citizens and the perception of students affected by negative drawbacks.

## Summary

In view of the necessity to implement an inclusive higher educational environment, in this study I have planned to discuss in a comparative perspective the relevant legal provisions

<sup>36</sup> Factor analysis, Varimax rotation, the three factors together explain 82.2%, KMO=0,884.

and students attitude towards special needs peer in two states: Hungary and Romania. Analysing the equity related regulations in higher education I reached the conclusion that the situation in the two countries is rather different, but has the same problems: low income, marginalised living area, disability, cumulated disadvantages background, both referring to nationality and foreigner students also. The present-day Romanian legal framework is concentrating mostly on securing the right to basic services for special groups and is less preoccupied to build up specific needs orientated inclusive mechanisms. The Hungarian legal regulations are developing continuously since 1993 and are using clearly defined concepts, being characterized by a compensational practice in more than one direction. At the same time in none of the two countries is set up a monitoring system to the benefit of students belonging to special groups.

The research tried to reveal what means of support non-traditional students, confronting the policy conceptions with the students` perception. Based on the policy analysis, the supporting attitude was measured on three dimensions: acceptance of the nonfinancial/financial support, and personal contact, considering also the intensity of the relation.

In connection with student attitude towards special peer groups, I started from the hypothesis that the students` way of looking at their mates with special needs is not homogeneous and the different groups are seen differently: students are inclined to think about various special groups in different terms and apply different social closeness/distances to them. In this regard there are also significant country related differences. During the empirical research I studied two different databases which confirmed my hypothesis. Moreover, I found that in regard with all analysed dimensions students from Romania have a more supportive attitude towards their fellow students with special needs compared to their peers from Hungary. It was confirmed that student perceptions have any latent structure: internal ethnic difference, economic disadvantage/disabilities and the foreign factors form the attitude structure. The situation reflects in fact the two different interpretations of the `Roma problem` in Central-Eastern European countries: one which sustains that Roma are a national and cultural minority, and the other saying they are a social group with cumulative socio-economic disadvantages (Forray R. and Kozma 2013).

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