

2024 ANNUAL REPORT



At the Roma Education Fund (REF), we believe **education** is more than a tool for personal growth—it is a **foundation for building resilience**, dignity, and opportunity across generations. **Our mission** is clear: to increase the resilience of Roma communities in the face of social, economic, environmental, health, and political changes and crises through education.



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REF'S THEORY OF CHANGE

Our theory of change is rooted in the belief that **education** must be inclusive, relevant, and connected to real opportunities. We support Roma learners from early childhood to adulthood through community-based education models and digital learning initiatives. At each stage, we remove barriers and create environments where learning can thrive.

But education alone is not enough. We build bridges to the **labor market** through vocational training, skill development, and partnerships with employers. We empower the next generation of **Roma leaders** through mentoring, financial support and civic engagement programs. And we ensure Roma voices are heard in public life by promoting advocacy, cultural identity, and democratic participation.

Through these three pillars — education, employability, leadership — we aim to create not only stronger individuals, but stronger communities. REF's approach is collaborative, data-driven, and adaptive. Across every country and program, our goal is the same: to ensure Roma communities are not only included, but equipped to lead and thrive.



REDJEPALI CHUPI
TEAM LEADER - ROMA HUMAN
CAPITAL



CIPRIAN NECULA
EXECUTIVE PRESIDENT



STANISLAV DANIEL
TEAM LEADER -
COMPLEMENTARY EDUCATION
CENTRES



CLAUDIA CRAIU
TEAM LEADER - PUBLIC AFFAIRS

NETWORK FOR STRATEGIC GROWTH

In 2024, the Roma Education Fund (REF) took bold steps to consolidate its internal systems and strengthen collaboration across its expanding network. Under the strategic umbrella of the Roma Foundation for Europe (RFE) network, REF focused on aligning country entities, accelerating innovation, and scaling knowledge across borders. These efforts were essential not just for organizational development, but for deepening the impact of our mission to increase the resilience of Roma communities through education.

Knowledge Management: From Stabilization to Synergy

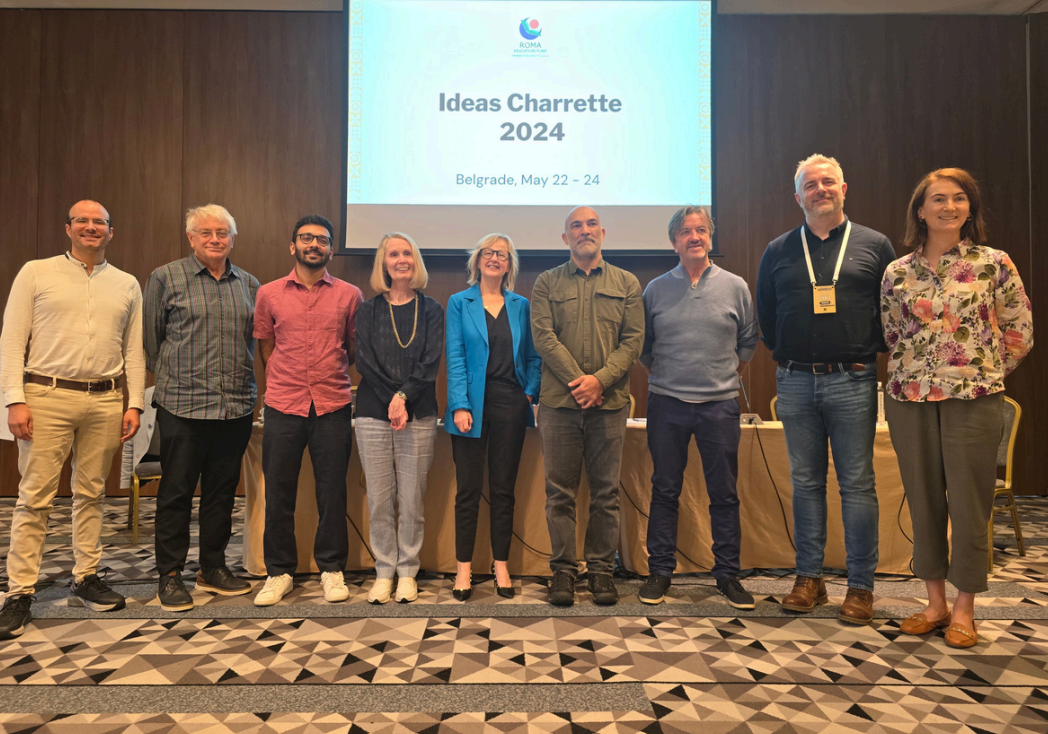
A major milestone of the year was the formal launch of REF's Knowledge Management initiative. From February to July 2024, we undertook a coordinated effort to stabilize our operational entities and ensure alignment with REF's broader strategic goals. This initiative created a common framework for internal learning, performance tracking, and cross-country exchange.

Knowledge at REF is understood as an evolving resource, one that must be cultivated, shared, and strategically applied. By investing in institutional memory, shared tools, and internal communication platforms, we created the conditions for stronger collaboration across all REF offices. These efforts enhanced consistency in implementation, allowed for quicker adaptation to emerging needs, and laid the groundwork for innovation across our programs.

NETWORK FOR STRATEGIC GROWTH

In May 2024, REF convened its first-ever “Innovating Education for Roma Communities: **Charrette**”, bringing together teams from Romania, Serbia, North Macedonia, and Slovakia, alongside six leading international education innovators. Held in partnership with Innovation Unit, the four-day intensive workshop enabled in-depth exploration of creative pedagogical practices and emergent learning models tailored to Roma contexts. Experts such as Stephen Harris, Jan Owen, Dominic Sharpe, Franco Mosso Cobián, Chris Harte, and Adithya Narayanan shared case studies from diverse global settings - ranging from Barcelona’s Learnlife hubs to youth empowerment initiatives in India, Australia, and Spain - enriching the REF network’s strategic vision. The Charrette served as both a reflective and generative forum, facilitating the co-design of REF’s future strategic objectives and fostering a collaborative innovation ecosystem to transform Roma education across Europe.

In April 2024, REF hosted its inaugural **Educators Congress**, bringing together 35 dedicated educators from Romania, North Macedonia, Bulgaria, Slovakia, and Serbia to advance transformative approaches in Roma education. Over the course of three intensive days, participants engaged in structured professional development, peer-led workshops, and collaborative design labs focused on culturally responsive pedagogy, digital innovation, and inclusive learning environments. The Congress marked a pivotal step in formalizing the REF Educators Network as a cross-national community of practice, one committed to educator empowerment, shared learning, and pedagogical innovation. It also reaffirmed REF’s role as a regional convener and catalyst for educational excellence across Central and Eastern Europe.



NETWORK FOR STRATEGIC GROWTH

Strengthening Our Role as a Education and Service Provider

REF Romania pursued and received key national accreditations, signalling the growing institutional capacity of the network. These included:

- **Public Utility Status:** This designation would formalize REF Romania's role as a strategic contributor to national education goals.
- Accreditation for **Mediation Services:** Received in August 2024, this certification allows REF Romania to offer professional mediation in the labor market.
- Accreditation for **Entrepreneurial Training:** REF is now a recognized provider of entrepreneurship courses under Romania's professional training framework.

These achievements support REF's ambition to become not only a grant-making and implementation organization but also a certified provider of high-quality educational and employment services.



RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT: TOWARD A DATA-DRIVEN ORGANIZATION

In 2024, REF established an internal Research and Development (R&D) Division, dedicated to generating insights that inform policy proposals, advocacy efforts, and strategic planning. The division harnesses the internal expertise of REF's multidisciplinary team to:

- Advance REF as a center for innovation in Roma education and employment.
- Promote the use of digital tools and methods to better connect Roma communities with opportunity.
- Equip the organization with data-driven analysis to improve the efficiency and impact of interventions.
- Strengthen the evidence base for policy advocacy in national and regional contexts.

This transition marks a deliberate shift from reactive programming to proactive influence, where REF not only responds to community needs but anticipates and shapes policy agendas with credible research and tested models.



STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS: EXTENDING OUR REACH



The year also saw the expansion of strategic partnerships that enhanced both REF's visibility and impact:

- **The University of Sydney** included REF as its first European partner in the Sydney International Equity Scholarship Program, with Alexandru Stan from REF Romania becoming the inaugural Roma participant.
- **Accenture Romania** provided a major in-kind donation, reinforcing our infrastructure and operational capabilities.
- Partnerships with cultural associations such as CEC SNK, CUAC, and NABU helped integrate Roma-authored literature and culturally relevant materials into schools, strengthening identity and inclusion through storytelling and educational workshops.

Through these strategic investments in knowledge, systems, and relationships, REF is building a smarter, more connected, and more resilient network, one that is well-positioned to scale impact, shape policy, and deepen the social transformation already underway in Roma communities across Europe.

BENEFICIARIES

977 Early Childhood Education**653** Primary Education**658** Lower and Upper Secondary**252** Young Adults (18-25)**414** Early Adulthood (25-35)**1426**

Parents/Guardians

**714**Educators
Teachers
Schools
Principals

Education Support

**9,434**

Comprehensive support including scholarships, supplies, meals, digital tools, training, language and psychological services, legal aid, and more.

Career Counseling

234

women and youth trained

Time Investment

135

mentors

31,350learning hours
for 4,380
beneficiaries

Community Engagement

998community members involved
in different activities

REF ROMANIA - KEY RESULTS 2024



In 2024, REF Romania significantly expanded its operational scope and deepened its impact through a diverse portfolio of educational and social inclusion programs. These initiatives were implemented in alignment with the Roma for Europe (RFE) strategic framework and in response to persistent educational inequities affecting Roma communities across the country.

Roma HUB Development

The establishment of the Roma HUB, inaugurated on May 27, 2024, marked a key institutional achievement. Designed as both a physical and symbolic center for collaboration, the HUB brings together teams from REF, REDI, and Roma for Democracy under one roof.

More than an administrative headquarters, the HUB functions as a shared ecosystem for innovation.



EU REGIONAL ACTION FOR ROMA EDUCATION: INCREASED EDUCATION SUPPORT AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ROMA STUDENTS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND TURKEY (RARE)” PHASE II

Donor: European Commission, Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR).

Budget: 4.500.099 Eur |

Period: January 2023 – December 2026

Countries: Albania (ALB), Bosnia and Herzegovina (BIH), Kosovo (KOS), Montenegro (MNE), North Macedonia (MAC), Serbia (SER), and Turkey (TUR) |

Target group: 3,800 Roma children and youth across all educational levels (ECD, Primary, Secondary, Tertiary)

Main results

- 13 organizations were selected from among 41 applicants for the grant contract.
- A total of 21 grant contracts, amounting to €2 millions, have been awarded to partner organizations across the seven countries to implement activities outlined for two academic years.

Educational services and support:

- 1,409 total beneficiaries (out of the 3,800 planned for the entire project duration) – 37.08%
- 497 preschool children (out of the 1,200 planned for the entire project duration) – 41.42%
- 497 parents (out of the 1,000 planned for the entire project duration) – approximately 49.7%
- 285 secondary education students (out of the 300 planned for the entire project duration) – approximately 95%
- 164 tertiary education students (out of the 200 planned for the entire project duration) – approximately 82%



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Main results

- 1887 individual, and 443 group mentoring sessions
- 273 students who benefited of 31 trainings for soft skills and employability
- 5 Toy Libraries established
- 163 workshops and 73 outdoor activities implemented for ECD children
- 120+ coordination meetings with schools and institutions to support ECD
- 6 conferences held on inclusive education
- 393 scholarships awarded for SEC and TER students
- 103 SEC &TER students graduated
- 70 SEC&TER students received tutoring (352 individual & 21 group sessions)
- 377 SEC&TER students received mentoring (1,871 individual & 443 group sessions)
- 25 alumni meetings for SEC &TER held with 153 participants
- 18 employer meetings led to 16 MoU and 14 students hired post-internship for SEC &TER
- 76 internship opportunities for SEC&TER students

ONE-STOP-SHOP CENTRE FOR VULNERABLE MIGRANTS FROM UKRAINE IN BUCHAREST

Period: July 2022 – December 2025) |

Donor: Council of Europe Development Bank (CEB) |

Budget: 872.000 Eur.

Target group: Roma and non-Roma refugees from Ukraine, children and adults

Main results

Solution for sustainability: Negotiations with Bucharest Sector 2 for relocating the Refugee Centre OSS to one of the public spaces in District 2 and for jointly implementing activities for refugee children and youth.

· Since the beginning of the project, almost **423 beneficiaries (children and adults)** benefits of the OSS Centre services;

277 children have been involved in the integrated interventions at the project level;
5472 sessions provided at the OSS Centre (educational services, language courses, counselling session, personal development sessions, access to public services, etc.)

· Almost **3720 social vouchers** granted for participation in project activities

· Almost **500 school enrolment activities** for children (packages with educational materials and requisites supply, social vouchers to cover the needs of clothing, shoes, etc.)





VELUX - PEDAGOGY SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM ENHANCE THE ROMA HUMAN CAPITAL THROUGH TARGETED INVESTMENTS IN EDUCATION AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Period: July 2014 – December 2024) |

Donor: The Velux Foundations

Budget: 1.139.000 Eur.

Target group: Roma students in Pedagogical high schools and Roma educators

After a ten-year strategic partnership, the VELUX–Pedagogy Scholarship Program concluded in December 2024, marking the culmination of a transformative investment in teacher development and intercultural education in Roma communities. The final year of the program supported 17 educators in applying inclusive pedagogical practices that integrate Roma history, identity, and cultural awareness into early childhood and primary classrooms.

Throughout 2024, teachers participated in a range of professional development activities, including workshops on intercultural teaching methods, training in the **Italian Reggio Emilia approach**, and the **“I Can” educational model by Riverside School in India**. These engagements emphasized creativity, learner agency, and culturally affirming environments.

A key output of the program was the publication of **“Interculturality: A REF Guideline for Educators”**, co-authored with participating teachers, which now serves as a foundational resource for training educators in inclusive, diversity-aware education.

The program reached over 300 Roma and non-Roma students, helping to cultivate mutual respect, reduce classroom bias, and promote cultural pride.

The program concluded with a national closing conference in December 2024, uniting 40 educators, mentors, and civil society stakeholders in a celebration of collective learning, impact, and future commitment. The legacy of this long-term collaboration with VELUX is a stronger, better-prepared community of educators committed to equity and excellence in Roma education.

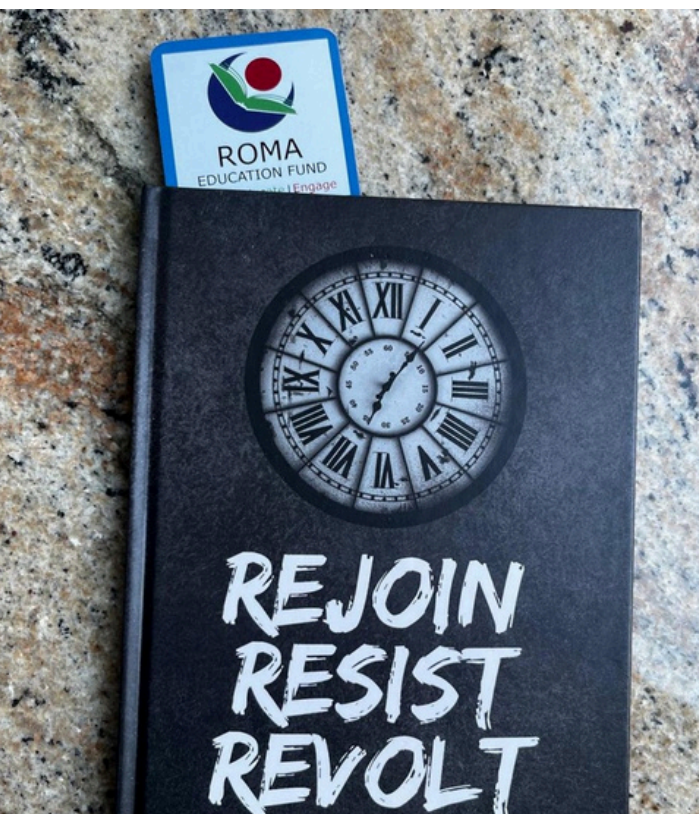


THE "RESIST, REVOLT, REJOIN!" AND "ROMA ORIGIN" PROJECTS ENHANCE THE ROMA HUMAN CAPITAL THROUGH TARGETED INVESTMENTS IN EDUCATION AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

The "RESIST, REVOLT, REJOIN!" project, funded by the local administration of Dortmund, Germany, was implemented by GrünBaugGmbH from Germany, Youth Club Stolipinovo from Bulgaria, and REF Romania.

The project concluded in April 2024 with the launching of the "Resist, Revolt, Rejoin!" book. This compilation features articles written by young participants from the 3 countries.

The ROMA ORIGIN project, funded by the local administration of Dortmund, Germany, was implemented by GrünBaugGmbH from Germany, Youth Club Stolipinovo from Bulgaria, and REF Romania. An interdisciplinary exchange program for 30 disadvantaged young people who are at risk of social exclusion from Germany, Bulgaria and Romania. Main activity - a 10-day conference as part of the Dortmund festival "Djelem Djelem", where the young people will develop common perspectives on the Origins of the European Roma People.



FIRST STUDENT IN THE FAMILY - FIRST STEP TOWARDS PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS - STUDENT-FAM (ID 324184)

Implementation Period: February 2025 – January 2028

Donor: European Union, through the Education and Employment Program (PEO)

Coordinator: Dunarea de Jos University;

Partners: Roma Education Fund (REF) and Elena Caragiani High School in Tecuci

REF Budget: €547.224 (out of approx. €1.5 million)

Target group: 360 youth at secondary and tertiary educational levels from vulnerable groups (with a focus on Roma).

POLI EDUCATION - A CHANCE FOR EVERYONE (ID 324475)

Implementation Period: March 2025 – April 2027

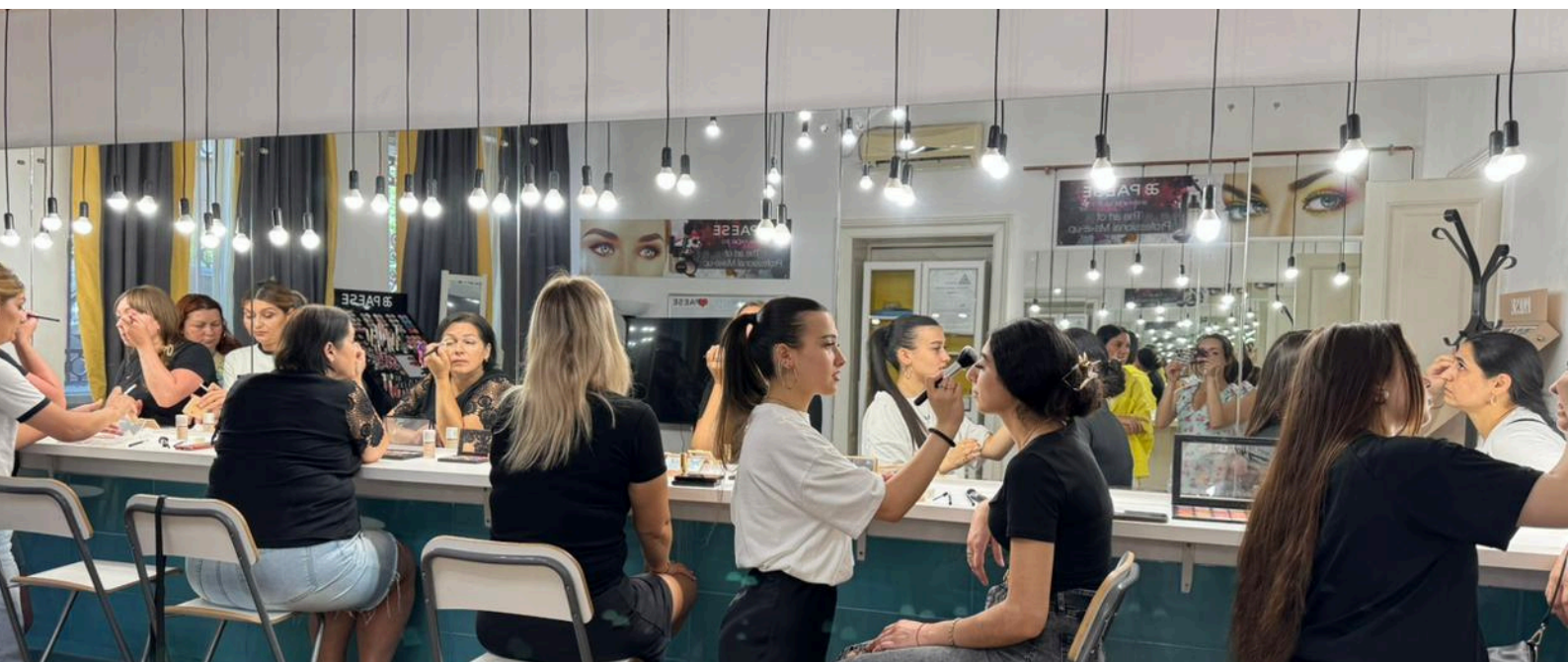
Donor: European Union, through the Education and Employment Program (PEO)

Coordinator: National University of Science and Technology Polytechnical University Bucharest

Partners: Roma Education Fund (REF) and 3 high schools

REF Budget: €122.349 (out of approx. €1.5 million)

Target group: 360 youth at secondary and tertiary educational levels from vulnerable groups (with a focus on Roma).



ELEVATING ROMA MEMORY THROUGH ADVOCACY: NICOLAE GHEORGHE SQUARE BECOMES REALITY

In 2024, one of the most symbolically powerful achievements of REF Romania was the formal recognition and inauguration of Nicolae Gheorghe Square, honoring the legacy of the renowned Roma sociologist, human rights advocate, and founder of the Roma civic movement in Romania.

On February 29, the Bucharest City Council officially approved the naming of the square, a long-standing civic initiative led by REF and Roma Foundation for Europe Network. This milestone was followed by a **public inauguration ceremony on April 8**, coinciding with International Roma Day, and attended by public officials, civil society leaders, and members of the Roma community. The event celebrated not only Nicolae Gheorghe's enduring contributions to human dignity and social justice but also marked a significant step forward in the public recognition of Roma history and identity in Romania's urban landscape.



THIRD EDITION OF THE INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC CONFERENCE ON “GHEORGHIANISM (NICOLAE GHEORGHE’S DOCTRINE) AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE ROMA NATION”.

In November 2024, REF Romania, in collaboration with the Master of Roma Studies and the Faculty of Political Sciences at SNSPA Bucharest, organized the third edition of the International Scientific Conference on “Gheorghianism (Nicolae Gheorghe’s Doctrine) and the Foundations of the Roma Nation.” The event was ceremonially opened at the Roma HUB, while all academic sessions were held at SNSPA. Over the course of two days, the conference brought together more than 25 researchers, doctoral candidates, and master’s students from five countries, creating a dedicated platform for advancing academic research on Roma history, identity, and social transformation. Drawing on the intellectual legacy of Nicolae Gheorghe, participants explored a wide range of themes, including the Roma experience under communism, gender and stigma, cultural expression in public spaces, and Roma participation in state and military institutions. A selection of the most compelling contributions will be featured in an upcoming issue of Political Sphere Magazine, ensuring that the dialogue continues within scholarly and policy-oriented communities.



REF ROMANIA - COMMUNICATION DIVISION: EVENTS AND STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS 2024

In 2024, REF Romania's Communication Division actively promoted Roma history, culture, and contemporary identity through a series of high-visibility public events, institutional collaborations, and multimedia campaigns. These efforts aimed to strengthen public engagement, broaden advocacy impact, and elevate Roma voices across mainstream platforms.

- February 20: REF co-organized a national event at the Museum of the Romanian Peasant to commemorate 168 years since the abolition of Roma slavery, attended by ambassadors, policymakers, and civil society leaders.
- April 11 – On the occasion of April 8 - International Roma Day: REF launched the third episode of the Eye of the Mind project at the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung in Bucharest. The event featured a keynote by Casa Paleologu and an art exhibition by Eugen Raportoru as part of the One World Festival.
- February–March: In collaboration with the National Museum of Contemporary Art, REF showcased artwork created by Roma refugee children from Ukraine.
- May 16 – Roma Resistance Day: REF partnered with the Goethe-Institut to present Art as an Expression of Resilience, a cultural event commemorating Roma resistance through creative expression.
- May: The Roma Faces of Change exhibition was selected for inclusion in the main exhibition at Romanian Design Week, offering public visibility to contemporary Roma identity and creativity.
- June: REF partnered with the Polytechnical University of Bucharest to mark the International Day of Play, furthering child development advocacy through inclusive, community-centered activities.

These events not only highlighted Roma culture and resilience but also reinforced REF's role as a key convener and thought leader in national cultural and educational discourse.



REF ROMANIA - COMMUNICATION DIVISION: EVENTS AND STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS2024

In 2024, REF's Communication Department proved that storytelling is not only a tool for awareness—but a force for identity, pride, and social change. Through RomStoria and Roma Status, REF brought Roma voices, histories, and aspirations into the public eye with creativity and confidence.

Together, these two digital platforms have not only amplified Roma excellence—they've created a space where identity and inspiration meet, building a new narrative for a new generation.



In its third year, **RomStoria**, hosted by historian Valentin Negoii, PhD, continued to reshape how Roma history is told—combining academic depth with digital reach.

With 68 video materials, a growing YouTube audience, **over 1 million views on TikTok**, and the launch of the RomStoria Interviews Podcast, the project made history personal, accessible, and powerful.

Roma Status, hosted by Gabriel Zorilă, spotlighted today's Roma changemakers—from artists and educators to entrepreneurs and activists—across Instagram, TikTok, Spotify, and more.

The podcast Inspiring Stories and vibrant visual storytelling earned the project over 15,000 followers and **more than 1.2 million** views on its top-performing posts.



REF SERBIA - KEY RESULTS 2024



In 2024, REF Serbia advanced its mission of inclusive education and employment for Roma communities by delivering targeted interventions at the nexus of vocational education, labor market integration, and gender equity. Activities were implemented under two flagship initiatives: WinForVET II and QualiROM, both rooted in the broader Roma for Europe strategy.

ADVANCING VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING THROUGH WINFORVET II

The WinForVET II project, supported by the Austrian Development Agency (ADA), entered its preparatory phase in 2024, laying the groundwork for full implementation across Serbia, Albania, and Kosovo starting in 2025. The project aims to enhance Roma employability through structured vocational education, mentorship, and targeted job placements, with a strong emphasis on gender inclusion.

Key achievements in 2024 included:

- Institutional coordination with implementing partners: Roma Versitas Albania and Kosovo.
- Design of a regional framework for VET scholarships, soft skills workshops, and mentorship systems.
- Strategic engagement with vocational institutions and local employment agencies to secure buy-in ahead of the launch.

By targeting 365 Roma learners, 70 job seekers, and 500 participants in professional development, the project seeks to position vocational education as a viable, high-impact pathway for Roma youth—especially Roma girls and women.

BRIDGING EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT THROUGH THE QUALIROM PROJECT

Funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) via GIZ, QualiROM launched in August 2024 with the objective of supporting Roma youth—particularly young women—in their transition from education to employment. The project integrates practical skills training, digital coaching, and employer engagement to support both job readiness and anti-discrimination awareness.

Highlights from the initial implementation period:

- Development of a Virtual Coaching Platform to provide Roma youth with digital access to career guidance and skill-building resources.
- Planning and partnership-building with the National Employment Agency, Ministry of Education, and private employers to ensure long-term sustainability.
- Design of career fairs, internships, and inclusive workplace initiatives as entry points for direct Roma employment.

By positioning Roma youth as both skilled job seekers and rights-aware citizens, QualiROM exemplifies REF's commitment to systemic change through equity-based employability strategies.





REF SLOVAKIA - KEY RESULTS 2024



REF Slovakia continued to strengthen Roma youth engagement and empowerment through the implementation of the Roma Pride Youth Project, a dynamic civic initiative aimed at developing leadership skills, promoting cultural identity, and advancing public participation among young Roma.

CULTIVATING ROMA YOUTH LEADERSHIP THROUGH ROMA PRIDE

Supported by the U.S. Embassy in Slovakia, the Roma Pride Youth Project (Oct 2024–Oct 2025) was designed as a grassroots leadership pipeline for Roma youth. The program provides mentorship, training, and platforms for public engagement, rooted in both cultural pride and civic responsibility.

Core accomplishments in 2024 included:

- Establishment of a structured mentorship program, connecting 10 Roma mentors with 20 mentees for personalized development support.
- Launch of leadership workshops and planning of the Czech-Slovak Roma Pride Bootcamp, designed to foster peer-to-peer learning and advocacy skills.
- Coordination of public awareness campaigns focused on Roma heritage, diversity, and anti-stigma narratives, enhancing the visibility of Roma youth voices in public discourse.

The project also serves as a model for low-cost, high-impact interventions in contexts with limited Roma-targeted infrastructure, demonstrating the value of youth agency as a transformative force.