



# Leaving nobody behind

Ten Years of Presence: The Order of Malta's work with Roma communities in Europe



SOVEREIGN MILITARY HOSPITALLER ORDER  
OF ST JOHN OF JERUSALEM, OF RHODES AND OF MALTA



### About the Order of Malta

The Sovereign Order of Malta is one of the oldest institutions of Western and Christian civilisation. A lay religious order of the Catholic Church since 1113 and a subject of international law, the Sovereign Order of Malta has diplomatic relations with over 100 states and the European Union, and permanent observer status at the United Nations. It is neutral, impartial, and apolitical.

Today, the Order of Malta is active in 120 countries, caring for people in need through its medical, social and humanitarian works. Day-to-day, its broad spectrum of social projects provides a constant support for forgotten or excluded members of society.

It is especially involved in helping people living in the midst of armed conflicts and natural disasters by providing medical assistance, caring for refugees, and distributing medicines and basic equipment for survival. Across the world, the Order of Malta is dedicated to the preservation of human dignity and the care of all those in need, regardless of their origin or religion.

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# Trust, dignity, and mutual understanding: Ten years of support for Europe's Roma communities

A message from Franz Salm, the Order of Malta's Ambassador at Large for the Roma People

“

The Order of Malta has always worked with those who have no other means of support. As we look to the future, I want to ensure our continued presence in these communities for as long as the need exists, expanding the services and support we offer our Roma friends to safeguard their health and happiness.



## Dignity. Security. Hope for the future. A sense of belonging.

While most of us take these for granted, many Roma people across Europe cannot. Countless Roma people live in conditions of unimaginable poverty, isolated from communities around them, and without adequate access to basic services such as education, health care and employment. They are, in many ways, forgotten by the rest of us.

Love, and a desire to help those forgotten by society, motivates members of the Order of Malta around the world. This is particularly evident in the work we do with Europe's Roma communities. It was this that inspired me, on retiring from the corporate world in 2013, to spend the next ten years working with our extraordinary volunteers and employees who dedicate themselves to helping Roma communities across Europe.

As Ambassador, I provide support to the Associations and Relief Services of the Order of Malta who work with Roma communities. Over time, I have witnessed our work expand, from a handful of projects when I took office, to 25 projects in nine countries. Five of these projects are located in Hungary, and are now funded by the Hungarian government, which has appointed the Vice President of the Hungarian Relief Service as the special governmental advisor to 300 centres for Roma communities across Hungary. This is a testament to the high quality of the work

delivered by the Order of Malta in Hungary and the extent to which our work is accepted as the model which other organisations are encouraged to follow.

I co-ordinate these efforts, fundraise, and ensure the different teams learn from each other. I also spend time with politicians, policy makers and social and health care professionals, building support for Roma communities. But it is the staff and volunteers of the projects that create the change, each and every day, slowly breaking down barriers and removing the stigma and isolation that many Roma people face in their daily lives.

The range of services our projects provide continues to delight and surprise me: legal support that ensures children are registered in schools; after-school clubs that provide showers, clean clothes, and a space to learn and play; and microgeneration projects that provide clean, reliable, affordable energy, to name but a few. We support people to find work, to graduate from high school and attend university, to adapt to a fast-changing world and – importantly – to do this in a way that maintains and celebrates their culture and heritage.

Our projects put the people they serve at their heart. If people cannot get to work, we will purchase a minibus. If dwellings lack adequate sanitation facilities, we will install them in our centres. Music, dance lessons, and equestrian

training require practice and focus. Where we offer these, we enhance children's understanding of the importance of hard work, mutual respect, aspiration, and personal achievement. These also provide opportunities for children to celebrate their success in public, performing in concerts or participating in competitions.

I should also mention our extraordinary volunteers in Ukraine, where the Order of Malta has provided services to the Roma population since 2018. We have stayed when others have left, working in challenging conditions to continue providing education and support to Roma families since the war began in February 2022.

As I reflect on the past ten years, some memories stand out. I remember with great fondness the pilgrimage we made in 2015 with 220 Roma children and our team to Rome, where we met the Holy Father. In 2022, I was immensely proud to organise a concert in the Vienna Konzerthaus where 50 Roma children and their teachers who play in the Maltese Symphony orchestra in centres across Hungary performed to an audience including the Austrian president.

I also remember many other small and touching moments. I recall a child in Valea Crişului, Romania who, when I asked what it meant to them to be rich, replied “to have a second pair of shoes”. I recall a group of women and their children in Păuleasca, in Romania, who said they no longer wanted to return to begging on the

streets of Vienna and Salzburg because their time at the centre had shown them that there were other ways to support their family with dignity and hope for the future. And I remember clearly a visit to Pécs in Hungary where the Order of Malta had restored more than 50 houses for Roma families. When I asked one of the Roma community leaders who had participated in the restoration what had changed for him, he told me “now, I am a citizen”.

H.E. Franz Salm-Reifferscheidt,  
Ambassador at Large for the Roma people

March 2023

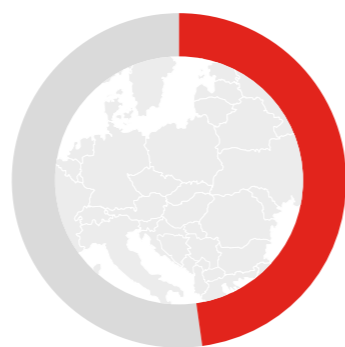
## The Roma in Europe: Centuries of need

Between ten and twelve million Roma\*<sup>1</sup> people currently live in Europe, of which around 6 million are resident in EU countries. The Roma population is younger than average: 35.7% are less than 15 years old compared to 15.7% of the EU population overall<sup>2</sup>. Most of them – around two thirds – live in central and eastern European countries, where they make up between 5% and 10% of the population.

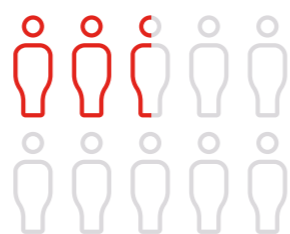
Roma people have lived on the fringes of European society since they first arrived on the continent in the 15th century. They are one of the largest minorities in Europe, yet the most invisible and marginalised. Roma people are historically nomadic, making money through jobs such as horse trading and metal work. As demand for this work has decreased, they have experienced increasing economic hardship. Roma people have faced persecution, rejection and forced assimilation for centuries. Estimates suggest that half a million Roma people were murdered in the Holocaust during the Second World War<sup>3</sup>.

Discrimination against Roma people in Europe continues today. They face many challenges, including social isolation. They may be refused access to housing or evicted without notice, denied entrance to mainstream schools, and refused jobs. Many are stateless, lacking papers to prove citizenship in the country where they live. Official statistics report that 25% of Roma people feel discriminated against in at least one area of life<sup>4</sup>, but the reality is that, for many more, persecution is an accepted way of life, and goes unrecognised by many who suffer from it.

**48%**  
of Roma in Europe  
live in poverty.



**25%**  
of Roma people feel  
discriminated against in  
at least one area of life



Despite ongoing efforts at national, European, and international levels, including the Council of Europe's Strategic Action Plan for Roma and Traveller Inclusion (2020-2025), these inequalities persist. It is these inequalities that we seek to address through our work with Roma communities across Europe.



*\*'Roma' is used as an umbrella term throughout this report, according to the definition of the Council of Europe. It encompasses Roma, Sinti, Kale, Romanichals, Boyash/Rudari, Lovara, Arlije, Vlach, Balkan Egyptians, Eastern groups (Dom, Lom, and Abdal) and many others; groups such as Travellers, Jenish and the populations designated under the administrative term Gens du voyage; and people who identify themselves as Gypsies, in accordance with the Council of Europe's definition. Some Roma use the term "Zigeuner", which translates into Zigany in Hungarian, Cingari in Italian, Gitanos in Spanish or Gitanes in French, despite this term being rejected by others as racist. Volunteers and employees of the Order use terms that reflect the wishes and preferences of the communities they serve.*

1. European Commission (2020) Roma equality, inclusion and participation in the EU. Available at: [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combating-discrimination/roma-eu/roma-equality-inclusion-and-participation-eu\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combating-discrimination/roma-eu/roma-equality-inclusion-and-participation-eu_en).  
2. European Economic and Social Committee (2014) Roma Health. Available at: <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/presentations/roma-health>  
3. For more information on the history of the Roma populations of Europe and the many challenges they have faced, see Council of Europe (2020) Roma History and Holocaust. Available at: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/roma-and-travellers/roma-history-/holocaust>  
4. European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2022) Roma in 10 European countries: main results of the Roma survey 2021. Available at: [https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra\\_uploads/fra-2022-roma-survey-2021-main-results\\_en.pdf](https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2022-roma-survey-2021-main-results_en.pdf)

## The Presence Programme: The Order of Malta's work with Roma communities in Europe

### Presence: the foundation of our approach

The key to the Order of Malta's approach to work with Roma communities is presence. We build relationships with the communities we serve, based on mutual trust and respect between our volunteers and staff and the families and community leaders we work with.

Although our projects vary across countries, we are always guided by the same core principles.

### Dignity and self-esteem

As well as meeting the basic daily needs of the Roma people, we seek to nourish and support the whole person, bringing dignity, companionship, and joy. By valuing each person at an individual level, we build self-esteem and long-term trust in hard-to-reach Roma communities.

### Present for the long term

Patience and persistence are required to gain the trust of Roma communities and to ensure that we are working with, rather than against, their wishes. This does not happen in a week or even a year; key to the success of these projects is our willingness to be present for the long term. This provides stability and sustainability and allows us to respond in a way that truly reflects the needs of the community, because we are familiar with those needs. We are not constrained by time-bound targets or donor requirements so are able to take as long as is needed to develop the relationships that are central to our work.

“

We encourage Roma children to embrace schooling. They become friendly, willing to interact with other people, and learn good habits. They feel they belong to a group and to an environment in which they are accepted, loved and respected. They increase their self-esteem and improve their school results.”

Anca Simu, Deputy Secretary General,  
Romanian Relief Service



### The Presence Programme in Hungary: Changing systems through a sustained and integrated approach.

The Presence Programme, established by the Hungarian Relief Service of the Order of Malta (HCSOM), provides a structured and sustained presence in Roma communities at a large scale.

The Presence Programme is now funded by the Hungarian government in 300 of the most disadvantaged settlements. It is a model for other organisations in Hungary, and informs our work in other European countries. We have support workers in each of these communities, delivering field-based social work and developing close relationships with families.

The Presence Programme offers crisis support and poverty alleviation while also addressing the broader challenges Roma communities face, with services to support financial planning and debt management, build social skills, provide parenting education, and address problems such as gender-based violence and addiction, as well as investing in housing where this is needed.

In Veszprém, an urban area southwest of Budapest, HCSOM has purchased housing which is rented to Roma families. This improves living conditions, provides security, and allows HCSOM to subsidise utility services, reducing residents' risk of debt.

**Integration not assimilation**

We encourage the Roma we work with to integrate, but not assimilate. This means providing them with opportunities to engage with wider society, whilst simultaneously celebrating their culture. We place particular emphasis on younger generations, ensuring that they can live happy and productive lives.

**Investing in future generations**

Education is an essential part of our approach. We want young people to have opportunities that were not available to their parents. We work closely with mothers, families, and community leaders to encourage them to send their children to school. We support the children in our care to build their self-confidence and to equip them with practical skills, encouraging them to stay until the end of compulsory full-time education. Although our programmes address different areas of need, they are all focused on ensuring that children and young people, and those who are responsible for their wellbeing, can thrive.

**Needs-based**

The Presence Programme is designed to address seven broad areas of need, from practical and emotional support for new mothers to education and employment. In each community, the support we offer is based on an understanding of local need, created in discussion with community leaders, and tailored to ensure that these needs are met. This requires patience, engagement with local and national government, and a willingness to address both immediate and long-term problems.



“The demand is enormous. We want to be here to help when needed, and to help in the way we are needed. We are able to change perceptions and change lives. And – importantly – to empower the people we work alongside so that they don’t feel different and they are able to integrate into society.”

László Moravcsik, Project Manager, Hungarian Relief Service

## Finding my voice, finding my place in the world: Anabela's story

My name is Anabela, I am 19, and I come from a Roma family of eight children. At the age of four, it all started with a weekend session when I went to play at the programme run by the Romanian Relief Service in Satu Mare. I have many memories regarding that day. The first memory is the way the team leaders played with me and how my heart was full of joy. From that day I gained a second family and I felt so lucky.

I remember playing catch. There was a little boy in the group, Alex, to whom nobody wanted to throw the ball, so I did. My group leader said he was proud of me. After that, I realised that I could help him with certain tasks even though I was small. I felt that I was important, and had no idea why that was so valuable, it was just games, but those games will define the rest of my life.

In 2014, I started the after-school programme and continue to this day. Initially, school was easy. But when I became older and a high school student, I felt like an outsider and was surrounded by strangers. I didn't know enough to cope with the demands of high school, and had to study to catch up with my peers. The Order of Malta supported me with counselling, advice, and love, and I managed to graduate successfully.

I know that I am who I am now because that programme gave me the opportunity to learn and be part of a wonderful community. Why am I still a volunteer? Because this is an organisation that I love with all my heart. I kept with me all the time the saying learned at the programme: "It's better to give than to receive".

Since leaving school I have been volunteering full time for the programme, which allows me to improve myself. My favourite volunteering activity is spending time with children, which gives me a good feeling because I see them enjoying it as much as I did when I was a kid.

“

I want to complete university successfully and I dream of having a job that I love. Now I realise that it is my turn to support my family and other children in a way that I was supported in the past by the Order of Malta. Who am I now? A young girl with a dream of a better future for the children and their families.”

Anabela, 19



# Countries where the **Order of Malta** is working with Roma communities across Europe



## 4

### Investing in the future: Our seven areas of focus

The Presence Programme is built around **seven** key pillars.



#### Hygiene and health facilities



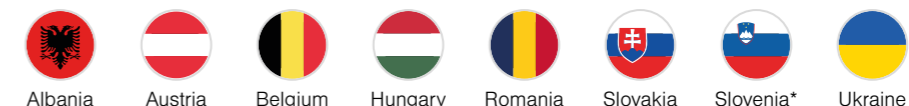
#### Medical checks



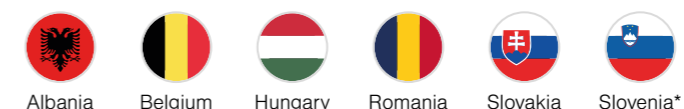
#### Kindergartens and playgrounds



#### Educational support for school children



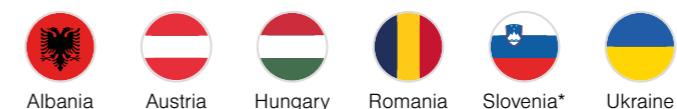
#### Support for mothers with young children



#### Employment support



#### Cultural activities



\*Slovenia operates a summer camp for young people, rather than a permanent centre for Roma communities.





## Hygiene and health facilities

Many Roma live in segregated communities on the outskirts of cities or large towns, disconnected from main roads. Roma settlements are often located near industrial zones, waste disposal sites or agricultural cooperatives, and lack basic physical infrastructure, including clean water and sanitation facilities<sup>5</sup>.

Much Roma housing is substandard, comprising self-made temporary wood or scrap metal shacks, tents, or trailers, in which large extended families reside. Combined with accumulated waste, stray animals, rodents and insects, these conditions expose Roma communities to infectious diseases such as diarrhoea, typhoid, hepatitis, scabies and tuberculosis, all of which have higher prevalence among Roma groups compared to the general population.

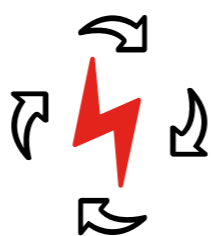
We establish hygiene facilities within Roma settlements, including showers, wash basins and laundry facilities. Young children attending our centres are taught the importance of handwashing, tooth brushing and self-care, establishing good habits that last a lifetime.



**In Hungary**, with funding from the EU, we are building solar power stations in Roma communities. The income generated from the stations will be given back to the families who live there, and the energy is used to heat and light their homes. This provides a long-term and sustainable solution to the needs of communities, many of whom were burning plastic and other hazardous materials to heat their homes, causing respiratory illness.

**By the end of 2024, close to**

**10,000** families will have access to renewable energy.



**In Belgium**, the Order of Malta's "De Fontein" centre in Ghent is open four days a week. People can come to shower, do their laundry, and receive health care and basic vaccination services. Many Roma in Belgium come from other countries in Europe, and do not have access to these facilities at home. Women are able to use the centre during the "Fontein Junior" sessions specifically for them, and they and their children can shower, while we wash and dry their laundry. Our volunteers also play with the children in our education facilities. Around 15 Roma families use the services regularly.



5. For more information, see Anthonj, C., Setty, K. E., Ezbakhe, F., Manga, M., & Hoesser, C. (2020). A systematic review of water, sanitation and hygiene among Roma communities in Europe: Situation analysis, cultural context, and obstacles to improvement. *International Journal of Hygiene and Environmental Health*, 226, 113506.





## Medical checks

Access to healthcare and medical facilities is a fundamental determinant of health and wellbeing. Health insurance is a prerequisite for accessing health care in many European countries, yet around 15% of Roma do not have health insurance where they live<sup>6</sup>. Many also lack the official documents required to access healthcare, are unable to read or understand information on available services due to language barriers, or struggle to manage the associated costs. Furthermore, many Roma people live in remote settlements without easy access to medical facilities.

We encourage preventative medicine, such as childhood immunization and effective antenatal screening, reducing the need for emergency care.



**In Albania**, we provide a range of medical services at our centre in Lezha. Doctors visit regularly, and we provide therapies and treatment, as well as medical tests, transportation to patients who need to see a specialist, and training and health education for the community. 430 medical checks are provided annually.

**“My daughter has a serious form of asthma. One day she suffered a severe attack and stopped breathing. I rushed to the Order of Malta’s centre in Lezha, who found her a doctor, helped me access the correct medication and were in constant contact with us, offering any help we needed. In addition to the medications that saved my daughter’s life, they helped us with clothes for my children and essential food for the children’s health. Thanks to you, my child goes to daycare and leads a normal life.”**

**Nora\***, mother to 2-year-old Elina\*



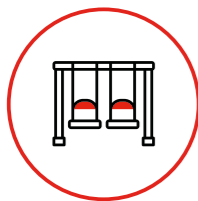
**In Romania**, we offer health counselling to the Roma community in Păuleasca. We also provide medical screening services in partnership with the Romanian government, including cervical screening services, with 21 women participating in the programme so far.

*\*Names have been changed to preserve identity*

6. European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2020) Roma and Travellers in Six Countries. Available here: [https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra\\_uploads/fra-2020-roma-travellers-six-countries\\_en.pdf](https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2020-roma-travellers-six-countries_en.pdf)



**In Hungary**, our programme in Tarnabod, established in 2007, provides optician services for 130 children a year, ensuring they can participate fully in educational opportunities. A bus takes qualified opticians to settlements where they provide eye tests to many children at once. Children who need glasses can choose frames and learn how to take care of them. When glasses are broken or lost – as is inevitable – they are replaced as part of the programme.



## Kindergartens and playgrounds

Early years care is not just about preparing children for primary education; it provides holistic support for a child's emotional, social and cognitive development. However, only 44% of Roma children across Europe benefit from early childhood education and care. This figure has remained almost unchanged in the past five years, despite an EU-wide target of 70% of children by 2030.

Access to high quality early years care (before children start formal full-time education) has many positive and long-lasting benefits, particularly for those from disadvantaged families. Children who attend kindergarten or other educational settings at a young age tend to perform better at school and socialise well with their peers.

The quality of care, and the level of parental engagement, are key determinants of the strength of these outcomes<sup>8</sup>. A higher uptake of early childhood education can also support women's participation in the labour market.

Many of our centres provide childcare facilities and access to outdoor play areas, which in some cases are used by other members of the local community, thereby supporting integration.



**In Slovakia**, the Orechov Dvor Community Centre includes a Mother's Centre to help young mothers with their small children. Each year, the centre supports around 20 children aged 0-3 at this crucial stage in life. Using Montessori methods, there is a focus on speech, movement, as well as teaching basic hygiene and self-care. Significant improvements were shown by children who attended the Centre regularly.

8. European Expert Network on Economics of Education (2018) Benefits of Early Childhood Education and Care and the conditions for obtaining them. Available here: [http://publications.europa.eu/resource/cellar/14194adc-fc04-11e7-b8f5-01aa75ed71a1.0001.01/DOC\\_1](http://publications.europa.eu/resource/cellar/14194adc-fc04-11e7-b8f5-01aa75ed71a1.0001.01/DOC_1)



**In Austria**, our project in Graz provides kindergarten and education services to around

**50**

young children.



Many Roma families have arrived in the region recently from other European countries, and require support to integrate and establish themselves. We ensure that they are ready for school and prepared to learn, through the provision of outdoor education, holiday excursions and other learning opportunities, which continue once they have started full-time formal education. Meanwhile, their parents are given help with school enrolment, including communication with schools and welfare officers if needed.



“

Thanks to the project, Barbara wants to become a doctor one day, and her brother Viktor wants to be a driver. Tony wants to be a policeman and Doris a singer. Željko has chosen the medical profession because he wants to lend a helping hand to people in need in his future life through his work, just as he was lent a helping hand. His personal and educational journey is an inspiration to many of his younger friends from the local Roma community.”

Kristina Čačić. Project manager, Sveti Ivan Krstitelj Centre (and godmother to 54 Roma children)



**Supporting emotional, social, and cognitive development in the early years.**

**In Croatia**, the Order of Malta's children's centre of Sveti Ivan Krstitelj provides support and childcare to the Roma community of Gornje and Donje Vratno. Members of this community are Boyash, the largest Roma ethnic group in Croatia, and many live in conditions of extreme poverty. School attendance is a particular problem, with many children not attending school regularly.

Currently, 55 children attend the Centre's kindergarten programme. They learn through play, and develop important life skills such as good hygiene habits, as well as learning Croatian. We prepare the children to make the most of mainstream education as they get older and to be able to integrate well with their peers.

In Croatia, as in other countries, the focus of our work is on building resilience and self-respect, and encouraging children to have aspirations for their future that reflect their interests and passions.

One former Roma pupil of the Centre - Kristina Oršoš - now works as an assistant to the Centre's Principal, supporting her with teaching and providing practical support with translation and liaison with parents. Kristina - who completed secondary school - is an inspiring role model for the young children, providing an example of the benefits of education. Thanks to her presence, the Centre is able to build high levels of trust and connection with parents and children, ensuring better outcomes for the children who attend.



## Educational support for school children

Our centres offer daily after-school activities for older children, which include personalised educational help. This provides children with a safe and supportive environment for studying, ensuring they can make the most of the educational opportunities available to them and that they are not disadvantaged compared to their peers. Some facilities offer language support for students who speak another language at home, and many offer cultural and co-curricular activities to encourage and motivate children to attend regularly.

**68%**  
of Roma children leave school earlier than their peers



and only **18%** go on to higher education<sup>9</sup>



In **Albania**, around 1,300 hours of educational support are provided each year to over 75 children at our centre in Lezha. Children enjoy courses that include homework clubs, literacy lessons, reading support and computer skills training.

“My daughter Ornela has eye problems. I was worried she would be left out of school, and unable to join in. The staff and volunteers of the Order of Malta helped me to see that education was the way to integrate my daughter so she could be the same as the other children. They helped me enrol her, and provide fun activities that she can participate in after school. She is happy, and enjoys spending time with her peers.”

**Eduart, 37, father of Ornela**



### A safe haven for children.

The exact number of Roma people living in **Ukraine** is unknown, although population estimates prior to the outbreak of war in February 2022 ranged from 50,000<sup>10</sup> to around 400,000<sup>11</sup>. The discrepancy may reflect the reluctance of Roma people to declare their ethnic origin due to fear of persecution, and the fact that many Roma in Ukraine do not have identity documents and are therefore stateless.

Beregovo, a small settlement just east of the Hungarian border, is home to around 5,000 Roma people, many of whom live in small huts with no sanitation facilities. There are few employment opportunities for the adults and infectious disease is a significant problem among the children.

The Ukrainian Relief Service has operated in the region for almost 30 years, and in 2018 began a dedicated programme to support the Roma inhabitants.

The centre provides health education, early years facilities, and a study room for older children to which they can do homework under supervision or take classes in maths, literacy, citizenship, and religious education. Around 40 children attend the centre each day, and the centre provides around 1,000 hours of educational support each year.

Children are also able to learn the violin and participate in vocational training and outings. The Centre’s staff emphasise health and hygiene, teaching children about its importance, providing access to facilities, and offering information about health screening and vaccinations to mothers. In the four years that the project has been running, the results have been impressive. The children are cleaner, their behaviour is improved, and they are performing better at school. They have learned to read, write and count. Many of the children now speak some Ukrainian and English, as well as Hungarian, allowing them to participate more fully in mainstream social and educational settings.



Four of my children attend the after-class lessons. I am really happy they come here. I can only write my name and that’s all. I can’t read or write. I want my children to achieve more than me. I want them to learn a profession, and here that is possible”

**Izaura, 35**



My mum can’t read and write, so she wanted me to join this project when it came to our school. Now I can read, write and count. I like my teacher very much. When I grow up, I want to be just like her.”

**Amira\*, 14**

*\*Names have been changed to preserve identity*

9. European Expert Network on Economics of Education (2018) Benefits of Early Childhood Education and Care and the conditions for obtaining them. Available here: [http://publications.europa.eu/resource/cellar/14194adc-fc04-11e7-b8f5-01aa75ed71a1.0001.01/DOC\\_1](http://publications.europa.eu/resource/cellar/14194adc-fc04-11e7-b8f5-01aa75ed71a1.0001.01/DOC_1)

10. Ministry of Justice & University of Minnesota Population Center (2016) All-Ukrainian Population Census 2001 - IPUMS Subset. Available at: <https://microdata.worldbank.org/index.php/catalog/2111>

11. Romani Early Years Network (undated) REYN Ukraine. Available at: [https://www.reyn.eu/national\\_networks/ukraine/](https://www.reyn.eu/national_networks/ukraine/)



**Responding to conflict:  
Tunde, Project Leader, Beregovo**

“

When war broke out in February 2022, many people in Beregovo left for other countries. We helped as many people as we could to cross the border, and often helped them to return home when they were asked to leave the places they had found shelter. War doesn't end discrimination.

Everyone was scared and we faced many new problems. Many of our teachers left temporarily although most have now returned. We got used to different groups of children every couple of weeks as people left and returned to the area. We set up a system to help Roma families access food parcels and got used to hiding when the air raid sirens went off. Then we had to find a way to work without electricity when the power cuts started.

We set up psychological consultations for everyone who needed it – the children and their parents, but also our workers who have to do more than ever, in incredibly tough conditions. We will stay and we will continue the work we do. The people here need us now more than ever before.”



## Support for mothers with young children

A brighter future for children starts with their parents. The average ages of marriage and childbirth in Roma communities remain significantly lower than those of other groups<sup>7</sup>. Early marriage limits education and employment opportunities for many Roma women; equally, limited education and employment prospects influence the age at which a woman may marry and have children.

We provide antenatal care, parenting classes and educational activities, and peer support groups for mothers, laying the groundwork for them to support and engage their children in full-time education. Childcare provision means that mothers can develop their own skills knowing that their children are safe and cared for.



### In Romania, we run a “Safe Start” programme for mothers with children under the age of 3 in Păuleasca, which supports around **130** mothers and their children.

Mothers are provided with diapers and milk powder if they need it and participate in sessions that focus on hygiene, child development and financial planning. Staff organise activities that encourage emotional, physical and mental development and facilitate group sessions where mothers can share their experiences and benefit from peer support, while building relationships and addressing social isolation.



In Slovenia, our summer camp programme provides guided play activities to help children develop their social skills in a safe and stimulating environment. Around 25 families stay a child-oriented seaside resort, while the children play and learn about the cultural and natural heritage of the region, and enjoy visits to the beach, their mothers are able to learn practical childcare skills, such as healthcare and nutrition, and to socialise with other mothers. We provide basic household items and baby clothes for those that need them, and encourage mothers to participate in decisions about how the programme is run.

7. European Roma and Travellers Forum & Romani Women Informal Platform “Phenjalipe” (undated) Making Early Marriage in Roma Communities a Global Concern. Available here: <https://cs.coe.int/team20/cahrom/7th%20cahrom%20plenary%20meeting/item%2004%20-%20ertf%20and%20phenjalipe%20joint%20paper%20making%20early%20marriage%20in%20roma%20communities%20a%20global%20concern.pdf>



## Employment support

Securing employment is a challenge for many Roma people: only 43% are in paid work, and 56% of those aged 16-24 are classed as Not In Education, Employment or Training (NEET)<sup>12</sup>.

We provide vocational training courses and support with transport for people who find work away from their home. In some cases we create employment opportunities within Roma settlements, such as gardening and farming programmes. The educational support and opportunities that we provide to school-aged children are also designed to support them with the transition from school to work.



**In Romania**, our programme in Diosig provides young Roma people with professional development and support, helping them to obtain the documents they need to be able to work and to find employment. We help them to acquire skills and qualifications that will appeal to employers, and provide safeguarding to ensure they are not exploited.



**37** young people were helped into employment in the last year.



**In Hungary**, we have created several employment initiatives in the communities where we are based. In Tarnabod we built an electronic waste disassembly plant that provides over 30 jobs to the local community. In Tiszabura, we established a sewing factory which employs 14 people to make canvas bags for retail stores, providing accessible and fairly-paid employment. And in Páty we offer employment to young people with disabilities in our workshops, providing an opportunity for them to earn money and develop skills as well as promoting inclusion and respect.

**“I haven’t had girlfriends before; I only had my family and siblings. Since I started working here, I found real friends”**

**Female worker, Tiszabura**



<sup>12</sup> European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2022) Roma in 10 European countries: main results of the Roma survey 2021. Available at: [https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra\\_uploads/fra-2022-roma-survey-2021-main-results\\_en.pdf](https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2022-roma-survey-2021-main-results_en.pdf)



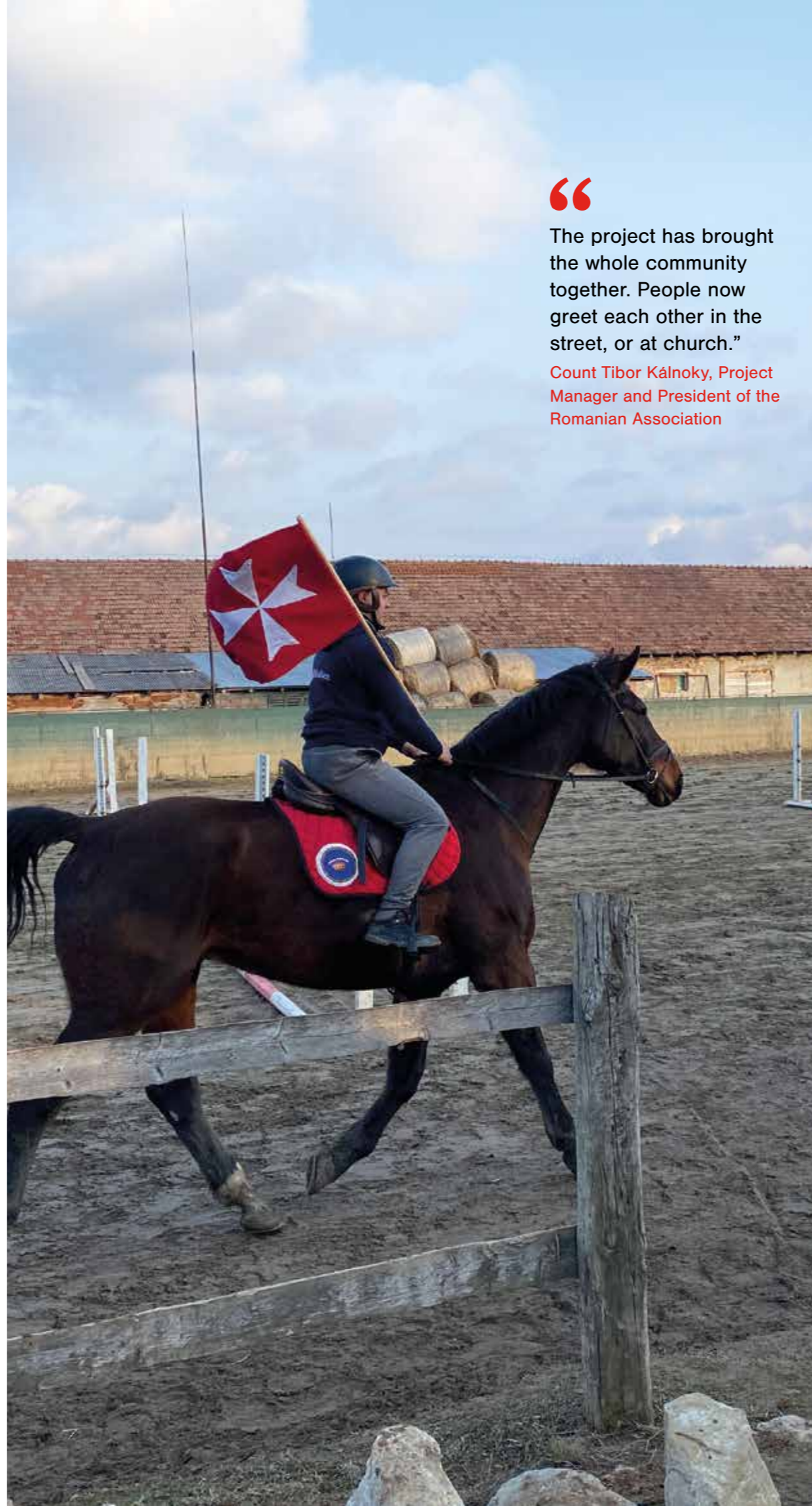
## Cultural activities

We provide after-school activities such as riding, weaving, sport, and music that offer opportunities for young people to build skills such as teamwork, resilience, and creativity, supporting their transition to adulthood. These activities also provide opportunities for young people to have fun and build relationships with their peers outside formal educational settings. Participation is linked to attendance at school and after-school educational support, so that young people are motivated to continue their education for as long as possible.



**In Albania, 30 children attend our after school cultural programme each week, which focuses on helping children develop creative and cognitive skills.**

The programme emphasises Roma culture and tradition, and includes sport and recreational activities.



“

The project has brought the whole community together. People now greet each other in the street, or at church.”

Count Tibor Kálnoky, Project Manager and President of the Romanian Association



## Nurturing traditional skills and culture

**In Romania**, the small settlements of Valea Crişului and Călnic are home to around 1,000 Roma people, many of whom live in housing with no electricity or running water. Adult unemployment is high, and few children complete secondary education.

Under the guidance of local landowner Count Tibor Kálnoky and his wife Countess Anna Kálnoky, the Order of Malta in Romania has established a centre for Roma children on the Kálnokys' property. Children can come after school to receive a hot meal, support with schoolwork from teachers, and access to pastoral and personal care as well as showers and washing areas.

They learn to play musical instruments, dance, sing and swim as well as receiving vocational training in skills such as weaving, embroidery and furniture restoration. Activities are chosen to nurture traditional skills that are culturally important to the Roma people, while also providing children with an opportunity to develop their creativity and enhance their employability.

Over time, the project has grown in scale. In 2014, there were 20 children attending regularly, and now over 90 children aged between 7 and 14 attend. Last year the centre provided around 540 hours of education support. At the start, three extra curricular activities were offered, and now there are 10 available for the children to choose from. Many, but not all, of the children are Roma, and many people who live close to Valea Crişului are keen for their children to attend the project. This integration is positive for both communities, building trust and respect as well as creating lasting friendships.

The project is best known for its horse riding and equestrian vaulting programme. The children who take part in the after-school coaching programme and continue with their education are given access to the Kálnokys' stables and are taught to ride. Many show huge talent, and are able to perform incredible stunts on horseback. The lessons foster and encourage self-discipline and responsibility. The children learn to ride, look after the horses, including cleaning the stables and to master all the different aspects of this challenging sport. Several have gone on to compete in and win regional and national competitions and perform for spectators.

Importantly, the children's educational attainment has improved significantly. The village school, once the worst performing in the district, has improved its position: in 2021, all children completed their education with no-one dropping out or leaving early.





### Cultural Activities



The project in Valea Crişului shows that when children’s traditions, culture and identity are celebrated, they are able to discover their own talents and fulfil their potential. Central to the project’s ethos is preserving Roma traditions while fostering social integration, and enhancing children’s self-esteem, motivation and learning.

H.E. Franz Salm-Reifferscheidt,  
Ambassador at Large for the Roma people



In Romania, Denes and Magor are both 17 and are students at Puskás Tivadar High School. They came to the Order of Malta’s programme with a love of animals but neither had much interest in school. Their participation in the programme has allowed them both to excel at vaulting and jumping, while continuing their studies. Denes is a triple national champion and Magor is a double national champion. Now, they are continuing their training at the Centre while also helping to train and support younger children.

**“I have a dream, which is to be the European vaulting champion but also to help other children fulfil their dreams, just as Valea Crişului helped me fulfil mine”**

Denes



### Using music to help children learn and thrive.

Music plays an important role in children’s development, supporting motor skills, language and literacy, and social and emotional development.

The Maltese Symphony **in Hungary** uses music to promote community building and early years development. Through musical tuition and the provision of performing opportunities, we seek to encourage young people to stay at school and complete their education, and to develop skills such as concentration, learning from feedback and discipline that will help them succeed academically.

The project runs in 47 locations in Hungary, and serves more than 1,000 children each year, with 40 music teachers as well as volunteers. The programme is available for children over the age of nine who attend elementary school in settlements with high levels of deprivation.

We provide free instrumental tuition and the opportunity to join orchestras and ensembles. The quality is high; while opportunities are open to children with varying degrees of musical talent and experience, participants are expected to attend regularly, practice and behave well during rehearsals and lessons. Teachers tell our staff that children who participate in these lessons do better at school, behave better, and are more likely to attend than their peers.

Social workers are attached to Maltese Symphony projects and build relationships with children and their parents. This allows them to conduct needs-based assessments and refer participating families to relevant social and support services.



Daniel\* comes from a broken home; his father is regularly in jail. At school he was often in trouble and disruptive in class. When staff from the Maltese Symphony went to his school to give a music demonstration, he was transfixed. After just a few months of participation, the world opened up for him and he discovered a talent for the guitar. Two years later, he had improved so much he received a scholarship from a musical institute. He became hardworking and unrecognisable from the previously disruptive, under-achieving boy. Daniel has now finished school, but comes back to help teach the little ones at the Maltese Symphony on afternoons and weekends.

Project Manager,  
Maltese Symphony Project



**“Music is an important tool for integration in the community. It provides personal satisfaction, and the joy of playing music together and the depths of the personal relationships that emerge, provide children with an important way to socialise. It also helps them to do better in school.”**

Project Manager,  
Maltese Symphony Project

*\*Names have been changed to preserve identity*

## Support the Order's work with Roma communities

The work of the Order relies on the generosity of its supporters around the world.

If you would like to make a donation to the work of the Order in support of Roma communities, please contact either:

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This report has been produced by the Global Fund for Forgotten People. Established in 2012, the Global Fund for Forgotten People supports works of the Order of Malta around the world, embodying the Order of Malta's ethos of caring for those who need it most, whoever and wherever they are. The Fund raises money from private donors and charitable foundations to support projects that benefit the most disadvantaged in society. It also promotes best practice and knowledge sharing between Order of Malta projects around the world.

[www.forgottenpeople.org](http://www.forgottenpeople.org)

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