Thematic Article

Social innovation in a Romani community. The case of the Gandhi Secondary School in Hungary

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Abstract

The Story. Following the post-communist transition of 1989–90, a Romani secondary school—the first of its kind in Europe—was established in Pécs, Hungary. This initiative began as a grassroots civic movement and operated under non-governmental management from 1994 to 2011. In 2011, the Hungarian state took over oversight, and the institution was restructured as a non-profit organisation. This study presents and analyses the Gandhi Secondary School as a notable example of social innovation. Research Questions. a) What prompted the surge of civic initiatives within the Romani community of Southern Transdanubia after the political transition? b) How can we explain the trajectory of the Gandhi Secondary School, which experienced initial success, followed by decline, and eventually stabilisation? Methodology. It utilises the framework of educational anthropology. The methodology includes secondary analysis of existing research, participant observation, narrative analysis, and social listening. Results. a) The uniqueness of the Gandhi Secondary School stems from its origin as a social innovation directly emerging from the local and regional Romani community. b) Although its lifecycle aligns with theoretical models of social innovation, its specific 'destiny' is closely linked to the socio-political context of the post-communist transition. Thus, this lifecycle serves as both a model and a unique historical case. c) The history of this innovation illustrates that in the Hungarian context, social innovations can only be sustained through strong partnerships with central/ local government.

Keywords: social innovation; educational anthropology; Romani education; Hungary; civil initiatives; Gandhi Secondary School

Theoretical Framework

In a previous study (Forray, Kozma & Malatyinszki, 2026), we demonstrated that social innovation is defined not only by its underlying models but also by its inherent uniqueness. Innovations always emerge within specific geographical and social spaces, shaped by distinct historical circumstances. This specificity is well illustrated by Gabriella Pusztai, who highlights the diverse socio-spatial variations in denominational education maintained through partnerships between the state and the churches (Pusztai, 2004, p. 84–98; 120–121; 258–262). Every social innovation is distinct—even when its life cycles appear similar. Consequently, social innovations are unique and essentially unrepeatable; they possess their own "destiny."

Social Innovations in Contemporary Hungary

Research conducted in recent years—compiled across several volumes (Márkus et al., 2019; Boros et al., 2021; Ibid, 2022; 2023; 2025)—gradually reveals the characteristics of social innovation in present-day Hungary. These findings suggest that social innovations primarily emerge within cultural life. The vast majority of our cases are grassroots initiatives arising from leisure activities (e.g., Dan & Kovács, 2021). Most remain within this sphere, only rarely evolving into economic innovations (Ragadics & Horváth, 2019; Radócz, 2021). The boundaries of these leisure-based activities are defined by local history collections (Hegedűs, 2019), community

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events (Mitrovics, 2021), musical ensembles (Mike, 2021), sporting events (Máté-Szabó & Márkus ,2019), educational projects (Forray & Bognár, 2022), and social enterprises (Tóth, 2022; Boros, Gergye & Lakatos, 2019).

An analysis of economic start-ups as social innovations (the business equivalent of grassroots cultural initiatives) is still pending (Bogdány et al., 2024). However, we already know that most start-ups fail just as other social initiatives do. Furthermore, the participants—the "local heroes" of the business world—often face failure due to the overwhelming power and influence of established economic organisations (Erdős ,2018).

Why is this the case? Why are local initiatives pushed primarily into the cultural sphere? Why do they falter in the economic realm, where "innovation" is typically understood as top-down changes initiated by senior management and implemented at lower levels (Hámori & Szabó, 2018)? How could this initiative be unleashed to drive economic and social change? Our research suggests that grassroots innovations spark when central control loosens in large organisations (including society itself). When a government becomes uncertain—often in the face of a sudden challenge—it creates space for "bottom-up" movements and initiatives. A prime example is the sudden wave of educational innovation triggered by the onset of COVID-19 (for numerous examples, see: Forray & Kozma, 2022). Similar patterns of government hesitation are often observed as parliamentary elections approach.

Why does this seem to happen almost by necessity? The answer lies in the development, status, and room for manoeuvre of the civic sphere, which is rooted in historical factors (Molnár, 1991). Successive waves of political centralisation in Hungary have weakened civil society, preventing it from gaining strength. This was not merely a consequence of 20th-century events; it re-emerged after the 1989/90 transition as a kind of "new system change." The casting of political roles has become increasingly one-sided: the government has increasingly concentrated power, attempting to sideline other players, including civil society. (The latter, of course, remains in the game, but is often forced into "irregular" or informal tactics.)

Unequal Power

This is not a uniquely Hungarian phenomenon. It has occurred across Central and Eastern Europe, albeit with varying degrees of impact. This is partly due to the recent past—membership in the Soviet sphere of influence—and partly due to deeper historical roots. Martyn Rady's (2024) recent synthesis of Central European history reveals that cameralism, the region's characteristic economic policy since the 17th century, steered social policy towards excessive government power. Due to the network of small towns, the feudal agrarian system, former Ottoman rule, and the constant pressure to "catch up" with the West, Central European states repeatedly developed tendencies toward absolutism. These are withered and marginalised grassroots initiatives. Consequently, civil society emerged with greater difficulty across Central Europe than in the western half of the continent. This fragility was further exacerbated by the Soviet occupation following the Second World War.

This explains why social innovations in our region have largely been relegated to leisure activities, while in the economic sphere, their growth is hindered by the dominance of the state or, since 1990, multinational corporations. It also explains why social innovations are not just theoretical models, but unique, individual phenomena.

Overestimated Potential

The unequal distribution of power has further consequences. Firstly, both the government and the civic sphere tend to overestimate their own capabilities. An increasingly powerful government seeks to penetrate deeper into the civic sphere, reaching into the private lives of families—much like the aforementioned cameralists of absolute monarchies. This remains true even in the neoliberal era; though direct government power may seem weaker, it is often co-opted by the institutions of international capital. Conversely, as the room for manoeuvre for civil society shrinks, its participants become more prone to overestimating their potential, embarking on activities they lack the resources to complete. Such failed civic initiatives often morph into political propaganda, appearing on the political stage as a contest between the government and the opposition.

Mutual Dependence

Another consequence of unequal power distribution is that neither governments nor civic actors can succeed without the other. In studying social innovations, we have realised that in Hungary, a civic initiative is only successful if it secures government support—whether political, financial, or both (cf. Kozma, 2022). Civic initiatives struggle if the government resists; however, government efforts also fail if they cannot win over civil

society. We see numerous examples of this, ranging from migrant support and environmental protection to urban development and water management (see Márkus, Boros & Kozma, 2022, p. 44–191). Partnership between the government and civil society: this is the secret to success in contemporary Hungary.

The Gandhi School

No Man's Land

The definitive history of the Gandhi—officially the Gandhi Secondary School, Technical Institute, College, and Primary School of Arts (hereafter, Gandhi)—is yet to be written. While frequently cited in academic literature (Varga, 2024; Boros, 2025), it is usually treated either as a model for Romani identity education or as a vehicle for social mobility. These two perspectives represent a long-standing dilemma in educational policy: the conservative focus on ethnic identity preservation versus the social policy focus on social integration and upward mobility (Forray & Kozma, 2010).

Since its inception, the Gandhi has struggled with this duality. Originally intended to foster a Romanicultural identity, it has evolved into an instrument of state social policy, specifically aimed at the social inclusion and labour market integration of the Romani population. This shift in mission was the price paid for transitioning from civil society governance to state control.

Despite its significance to the field of Romani Studies (Romology), the school's history has only been rigorously documented by one author (Dezső, 2010; 2013), whose work was limited by the intense personal and professional sensitivities surrounding the institution's staff. Our objective here is not to provide a full historical record, but to illustrate how this specific innovation was transformed into a formalised state organisation.

The Birth of a School (1992–1994)

Located in Pécs, the Gandhi was Europe's first Romaninational minority institution to offer a secondary school-leaving certificate (matura). It was established in 1994 by the Gandhi Foundation, with the vision of cultivating a Romani intelligentsia rooted in its own community. Pécs became the eventual site after the city of Kaposvár resisted the school's establishment (Dezső, 2010, p. 57–88).

The Romani population in the Transdanubian region has unique characteristics. Many belong to the Boyash (Beás) group, speaking an archaic Romanian-based language. Traditionally, the Boyash have placed a higher premium on formal education as a primary channel for social mobility compared to other Romani groups (Forray & Orsós, 2010).

The foundation was established on 11 April 1992, supported by a broad coalition of 18 organisations and 8 private individuals, including prominent figures such as János Bogdán, Anna Orsós, and Tibor Derdák. Even President Árpád Göncz lent his support. The goal was to train competitive, degree-bound students who would embrace their Romani identity and eventually return to revitalise their home communities.

The Heroic Age (1994–1999)

Under the leadership of its emblematic first school director, János Bogdán, the school experienced its "heroic age." In early 1994, the founders travelled from village to village across South Transdanubia to recruit students. The school opened in September 1994 with 56 students, selected from hundreds of applicants.

During this period, the pedagogical programme was solidified. Methodology for teaching the Boyash and Lovari languages—previously undocumented in formal curricula—was developed. The school became a global symbol of Romani intellectual training, attracting international delegations and journalists. By 1998, a dedicated campus was completed in the Meszes district of Pécs. Bogdán envisioned a complex that was not just a school, but a "second home." In 1999, the work culminated in the first graduating class successfully completing their final exams.

Internal Conflicts and External Pressure (1999–2010)

Tragically, János Bogdán died in a car accident in early 1999. While the first graduation proved the model's viability (Derdák, 2008), the mid-2000s brought sustainability issues. The foundation faced chronic funding shortages, and the campus began to deteriorate.

By 2008, the school faced the risk of insolvency. Professional and personal conflicts over leadership fractured the board of trustees; five of the nine original members departed, rendering the foundation virtually dysfunctional (Stemler, 2009). This crisis intensified the debate between those who feared the school's autonomy and those who demanded a state financial lifeline.

Nationalisation (2011–2020)

Following the 2010 parliamentary election, the state moved to settle the school's debts in exchange for tighter control. The original foundation was replaced by a state-owned non-profit company (2014). This was more than a name change; it was a "model shift." The school's assets were transferred to the National Asset Management Agency, and its operation was placed under the Ministry of Human Resources (EMMI, 2014–2020).

Identity Formation or Equal Opportunity? (2020–)

In 2020, management shifted from the Ministry of Human Resources to the Ministry of Interior, reflecting a new government strategy that categorises Romani inclusion as a social security and opportunity-creation task rather than a purely cultural one.

By now (2025–2026), the institution serves approximately 400 students (including adult education and the arts school) and employs over 100 staff. The current leadership has introduced vocational training, such as law enforcement studies, which provides a direct path to employment.

However, Gandhi's original uniqueness has faded. Rather than being a stand-alone beacon of identity formation, it is now part of a state-managed national network. While it is designated as a "methodological centre," its primary focus has shifted from classical secondary education toward vocational training and social inclusion.

Aims and Methods

Aims

By studying the Gandhi School, we examined a social initiative launched by Romani people during Hungary's democratic transition. Our inquiry focused on the initiative's ultimate fate with particular interest in the evolution of the partnership between civil society and the government.

We have followed the trajectory of the Gandhi School almost since its inception. We were also involved in the school's work at an organisational level, as it served, for a period of its life, as the "model school" for the Department of Romani Studies (Romology) at the University of Pécs. Individually, we have contributed to various publications based on research conducted within and about the institution (Boros, 2025; Varga, 2014). Below, we outline how our diverse methods of information gathering have been synthesised into a research methodology.

Approach

The methodological background for our investigation of the Gandhi School is rooted in educational anthropology. (For more on educational anthropology, see Tóth 2023; Tóth 2023a). Within this framework, certain terms are used in a specialised sense, marked here with quotation marks.

In practical terms, an educational anthropological approach meant that we viewed Gandhi not merely as a school, but as a community. We sought to understand the culture—behavioural patterns, values, norms, and sanctions—of those living and working within the institution, including students, teachers, and support staff (see Kozma ,1985, p. 69–93). Our primary question was not what they teach and learn, but how they live. In this approach, the school becomes a social arena where issues of social equality and mobility are decided. We focus on hidden rules rather than the manifest curriculum; community occasions (ceremonies, meals, leisure time, sports, etc.) serve as opportunities to observe the dynamics of school society.

Consequently, Gandhi is not just a building, but a symbol of the local and regional Romani population becoming an accepted national minority. The "Gandhi spirit" is a shared myth in which origin stories, collective memories, and shared activities intertwine. It is an anthropological question whether Gandhi represents cultural production or cultural reproduction: does it raise a new Romani intelligentsia, or does it shape a dual Romani-Hungarian identity? Educational anthropology integrates the differing linguistic and ethnic backgrounds of various Romani groups into the study of the school's society.

Participatory Research

The foundation of our investigation was participatory research. This involved more than mere data provision; it meant a continuous presence in Gandhi's life through attending events, delivering lectures, classroom observations, and ongoing cooperation with the Department of Romology.

Although this method is often criticised for its lack of formality, we consciously adopted a holistic approach. We did not keep formal logs of our observations; the study's concept matured over years of experience and professional debate. While official documents describe manifest functions (the mission), participatory observation allowed us access to latent functions: the weaving of informal networks between students, changes in teacher-student communication in classrooms and hostels, daily "rituals" (dining, dress, games), and gender relations.

Narrative Analysis and Storytelling

In the case of Gandhi, narrative analysis involved semi-structured and unstructured interviews. These supplemented the conversations held over many years with teachers, students, educational administrators, university lecturers, and civic activists. The goal was to collect stories, as they reveal community dynamics through their movement and subjective truths.

Founders and the first generation of teachers spoke of the "heroic age," the civic optimism of the transition era, and the original "Gandhi spirit." Former students focused primarily on how their self-definition changed under the school's influence and what they retained of the Gandhi ethos as adults. Meanwhile, current employees analysed the costs of institutional survival, nationalisation, and sustainability, balancing the founders' original goals with state expectations.

Community Resonance

Through interviews and conversations, we sought to capture the inner life of Gandhi; social listening helped us track the school's broader community resonance.

Observing and documenting community resonance included both spontaneous and guided field conversations, as well as participation in meetings and forums where Gandhi was discussed or even mentioned in passing. We monitored social media, collecting posts about Gandhi from 1996 to 2024 (though no quantitative analysis was performed). We also took note of "street-level" rumours and general public remarks regarding the institution.

Discourse Analysis

Through discourse analysis, we examined not only the grammatical structure of texts but also how reality is constructed through language.

We identified two main educational policy trends appearing in the texts (conservative vs. progressive/liberal). Our analysis showed through which lens a given text (e.g., an interview or newspaper article) presents Gandhi. It also highlighted the different actors' views of the "truth" (movement-based vs organisational narratives). Our aim was not to determine which is correct, but rather who says what, why, and along which interests. Regarding the changes after 2011, we analysed how internal and external communication shifted (e.g., the use of law-enforcement and administrative terminology vs autonomy). We identified recurring motifs in the texts (such as shared celebrations and meals) that build community identity, allowing us to understand the school's physical developments as symbols.

Finally, we must emphasise the holistic nature of our study. This is reflected in our terminology. We prefer to call this a “study” rather than “research”; we were, after all, “students” of this school as much as we were its observers.

Findings and Conclusion

Our investigation aimed to understand the model and life cycles (the "destiny") of a Romani-led initiative. The results are summarised below.

Symbols and Myths

Buildings: A constant question in the history of Gandhi was where it should be located and where it would finally settle. This was partly a matter of real estate and partly a question of social acceptance. Consequently, the Gandhi building became a symbol. Internally, it represented the sentiment: "We are here, we are present, we have arrived, and we are alive." Externally, it manifested the local society's and the wider community's willingness to accept the Romani and to live in the school's vicinity.

The Gandhi Spirit: This "spirit" is a continuous topic of conversation in interviews and stories throughout the school's life. These accounts reveal a complex phenomenon embodied by the Gandhi society. Preserving the "Gandhi spirit" represents an attempt to maintain the original mission even as the movement transforms into a formal organisation under changed circumstances.

Cultural production or social reproduction? This dilemma frequently recurred in our conversations. For those who viewed Gandhi as a national minority institution, the school created something entirely new (production). For those who defined it as a traditional school, it represented the improved reproduction of existing cultural relations (equal opportunity, social mobility, and dual identity).

Anthropological view or socio-economic approach? This dilemma emerged more from the stories themselves; we did not encounter it in the broader community. In public discourse, the sociological approach dominated (viewing the Romani through the lens of poverty, backwardness, and marginalisation). The anthropological approach (distinguishing among Boyash, Hungarian Romani, and Vlach Romani) was rare, and when it did occur, it usually focused on the Boyash's dominance.

The Besieged City

Through the secondary analysis of interviews, stories, and conversations, we were able to understand Gandhi from the inside—as if it were a "besieged city."

Origin Myths: Discourse analysis (narrative analysis) highlighted which group considers which origin story to be true and valid: those who still see Gandhi as a child of the democratic transition, or those who embraced the school and placed it on solid educational foundations. The conservative discourse sought keywords such as "tradition," "ethnic specificity," and "Boyash identity," viewing the school as a bastion of cultural heritage. In contrast, the progressive/liberal discourse was dominated by terms such as "mobility," "equal opportunity," and "social integration," viewing the school as a tool for escaping poverty. This debate has not ended; if it has quietened, it is perhaps only due to declining student numbers.

The "Golden Age": The movement-based narrative emphasised the freedom of the regime change and grassroots initiative (the myth of the "Golden Age"). The organisational/state narrative highlighted the transition from chaos to order, predictability, and professional sustainability.

Relinquished Freedom: Discourse analysis proved particularly effective in examining changes after 2011. Following the move under the Ministry of Interior, law enforcement and administrative terminology appeared. Participants increasingly speak of "autonomy" as a longed-for state or a relinquished freedom. The 2011 transition to state maintenance was perceived as a new survival strategy. The charismatic, emotion-filled era of the 1990s movement gradually cooled, giving way to organised stability.

Community identity: Discourse analysis identified recurring motifs (e.g., shared celebrations, meals, sporting events, leisure activities) that build community identity. Through this analysis, the symbolism and "mythology" of Gandhi (origins, buildings, ethos) became understandable.

Social Acceptance and Integration

By analysing community resonance, we tracked the changes in Gandhi's social acceptance, from its status as a "besieged city" to its integration into government social policy.

Mission: Initially, community resonance focused most strongly on Gandhi's mission (Romani nationality vs. social equality; escaping poverty vs. educating an intelligentsia). Later, the focus shifted toward the school's pedagogical life (learning, teaching, methods, results), as well as admissions, placement, and commuting (daily or weekly travel, boarding conditions). These debates intensified again on the threshold of "nationalisation"; while the majority welcomed it, a minority felt threatened and dispossessed. The debate largely centred on whether a Romani school "belongs" under the Ministry of the Interior (responsible for order, regulations, and inspections). At the time of writing (2025–2026), public discourse focuses more on the generous facilities,

opportunities, and prospects, as well as the fact that the "demographic drought" is gradually reaching Gandhi's core audience. Once again, the founders' fear returns: "What will become of you, Gandhi?"

Financing: Community resonance was perhaps most intense during the period of nationalisation. This included questions of funding and fear of the Ministry of Interior. The most frequent debates revolved around autonomy versus stability. Discussions in Facebook groups and on YouTube were often heated; cultural events were clearly seen as expressions of Romani identity.

Stakeholder Ecosystem: Analysis of the stakeholder ecosystem is usually centred on Gandhi's uniqueness. Is Gandhi still recognised internationally as a development of European significance? Or has it simply merged into the national education system, with all its positives (high funding levels) and negatives (enrolment difficulties, administrative overload, and wage issues)?

Conclusions

The story of Gandhi is the story of a social innovation—but not merely that. It illustrates the fate of social initiatives within a Romani community during Hungary's democratic transition. The momentum of the transition was necessary to launch the initiative, but integration into the formal educational system was the condition for this innovation to endure.

The interviews and personal stories, on one hand, and community resonance, on the other hand, revealed the contradictory nature of these events. Yet, through this complex chain of events, the transformation of a charismatic initiative into a formal organisation runs like a "golden thread."

Civic initiatives can only break through and force change if they enter into pragmatic, complex partnerships with government actors. However, the price of this partnership is that the charismatic movement must relinquish or transform its original goals. For the "Gandhi spirit" to live on, it must be nurtured consciously, continuously, and with great care.

This is why we say that Gandhi has a "dual self." On the one hand, it is an example of a minority community taking action and initiative toward social advancement and inclusion. On the other hand, it serves as a warning that the ultimate sustainer of social innovations is the very organisation (the state system) from which they initially sought to break free.

AI Disclosure Statement: This study was developed in continuous consultation with the Google Gemini 3.0 artificial intelligence model. The AI tool was specifically used to refine the linguistic style, structure the theoretical framework, and adapt the manuscript into English. The authors strictly adhered to the regulations and ethical guidelines set forth by the Faculties of Humanities of the Universities of Debrecen and Pécs. The authors maintain full accountability for the intellectual content, data integrity, and original conclusions presented in this study.

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