

Celebrating for Inclusion

The Udvar Festival in Hungary—an Initiative for empowering Roma inhabitants

Rahel Peterlini

“Gloco is an incredible opportunity to share our community engagement project with other like-minded people, to connect, to be inspired, and to join forces. Just like the SDG 17 (Partnership for the Goals) intends us to do.”

Abstract: *Udvar Festival is a culture, arts, and music festival that takes place annually in Arló, a small village in Hungary. The festival's focus lies on sharing Romani culture and music, and on empowering the Roma inhabitants of the village, especially the children. The social aim behind this festival is inspired by the SDGs that focus on building a more inclusive, peaceful, and resilient community (10, 11, and 16). Udvar Festival aspires to do so, reducing the marginalization of Hungarian Roma communities. — <https://youtu.be/4JJz3Cx6oBY>*

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Team members

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Fig. 6: Dancing kids and teens at the Udvar festival.



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Introduction and Motivation

Udvar Festival was created by four students as part of their Civic Engagement Project at the Central European University in 2022. After attending a class about Nationalism and Discrimination that focused on the Roma Community in Hungary as a case study, the students realized that there is a complete lack of positive recognition of Romani culture in the media. Even well-meaning reports discussed in class focused on poverty, marginalization, and other issues, whilst leaving out the colorful Romani culture full of dance, folklore, and music. The north-eastern region of Hungary, in which Arló is situated, has unfortunately become famous for anti-Roma discrimination and prejudice against the “Borsodi Gypsy”. The aggressive assimilation efforts of recent centuries have resulted in the fading of Roma culture and traditions; “Roma” or “Gypsy” has become almost synonymous with “poor.”

Due to this lack of positive representation and due to the forced assimilation (or perceived necessity to assimilate), Romani communities in Hungary are losing the connection to their own cultural identities. Poverty goes hand in hand with marginalization, as jobs and housing are especially scarce for members of the Roma community. As a result, many live without electricity. The students, who founded Udvar Festival, realized that they would not be able to solve problems connected to poverty due to insufficient funding, but that they could do something about the negative portrayal of Romani culture in Hungary, which is an essential part of the pervasive social discrimination, and thereby foster a more resilient community.

Udvar Festival sheds light on the beautiful elements of Romani communities, in order to fight prejudice and to foster healthy pride in the Roma inhabitants of the village. It aims to attract as many international visitors as possible, not only to share the beautiful culture, full of music and dance, but also to raise international awareness of Roma discrimination. In addition, the festival engages local Hungarians and Hungarian visitors directly, as spectators, participants, and co-creators, to enrich their understanding of Romani culture in ways they may not experience elsewhere. We aim to build a safe and welcoming space where people

who would not otherwise meet can engage in dialogue and find what connects rather than divides them. Due to the marginalization of the Roma community, many stereotypes and prejudices exist between the Roma and other Hungarian communities. By bringing together people from antagonistic groups, the Udvar Festival creates opportunities for reconciliation and the reduction of those very stereotypes.

Lastly, Udvar Festival has a special focus on the local youth. As the Udvar Festival team, we hope to instill hope and excitement for the future in the minds of Arló's children and a sense of pride in their cultural identities. The general lack of belief in or hope for escaping poverty is likely one of the biggest problems in the area. If young people don't see the opportunity to escape poverty, they are unlikely to make the attempt. We hope to inspire them to try.

Project Description—The festival itself

Udvar translates to courtyard or backyard, a space typically shared by several households. It can be forgotten about, and rundown, or it can be taken care of, have flowers, and be a meet-up place for family, friends, neighbors, and strangers. With Udvar festival, we want to recreate a familial and comfortable “picnic” energy in the garden that holds space for Udvar festival: the backyard of Jelenlét house. Jelenlét Pont is Udvar Festival's partner organization. It provides, among many other services, family mentoring and music classes for the Roma children in Arló. Jelenlét was the first point of connection to Arló, when the founding group approached the organization with the idea of a festival, they immediately jumped on board.

The festival grew year by year. Already in the first year, the Udvar Festival team organized a stage on which Romani artists performed, but also kids from the Jelenlét music school performing music and dance, showing off their colorful traditional skirts. For the international guests, a Romani dance workshop was organized so that everyone could dance together. Since the first year, the Udvar Festival ends with a big campfire, and everyone sits around and jams together. Coming together to jam and

sing is an essential piece of the local Romani community making. In addition, the initial students hoped to bring a little bit of their own cultures in, for example, by creating a South American piñata for the kids. Over time, Udvar Festival offered more and more cultural workshops, such as the Roma Hero theatre workshop and interactive improvisation theatre, in which participating children can relate to heroes in the Roma community, or storytelling about old Romani myths that are slowly being forgotten.

Udvar Festival could not run without its volunteers who help with ticketing (entry is free for locals), food stalls, and workshops. A large part of the volunteers comes from outside Hungary. This gives local children the opportunity to practice their English and volunteers the chance to really get to know the individuals they are dealing with.

It is hard for us to measure the outcomes or effects of Udvar Festival. We see the many smiles during the festival, the hugs, and the love that is shared. But can we really make a difference? Are Arló's Romani children growing up with a little bit more aspiration for their future? Are non-Roma Hungarians slowly warming up to their Romani neighbors? It is hard to put scientific numbers on such questions, but little things show us that our work in Arló is important and useful.

For instance, Jelenlét, the partner organization, noticed a significant increase in enrolment in their music school after the festival, as well as greater motivation of the already enrolled students. This does not only connect to the hopes and aspirations of Roma youth but also the pride in their music and culture. Since the first festival, two bands were formed: The Armi Trio, a talented local jazz/Gypsy guitarist (age 15), who is now receiving many performance invitations within Hungary. And the Roma Big Band—a band of local teenagers who are all part of the Jelenlét music school. Now, they are a key performing act of the festival. Similarly, teachers at the local school reported to us that motivation to learn English increased noticeably. This effect was already observable through the mere number of words many children learned just by speaking with international guests, organizers, and volunteers.

Each year, the mayor (non-Roma Hungarian) visits the festival, joins the crowd, and talks to Romani locals in a space they feel safe in, which

is theirs. Romani individuals rarely get their voices heard in local politics. Therefore, such eye-to-eye meetings are an important first step in the right direction. With every year, we also observed a growing crowd of non-Romani Hungarian visitors, who got attracted by the music, the colors, the food. This creates an opportunity for the antagonized neighbors to meet.

Connection to the framework of Global Citizenship Education and the Sustainable Development Goals

The SDGs are a great marker of orientation when building the foundations of the festival. Many of them go hand in hand, but the festival's strongest focus lies on the following:

Number 4: Quality Education: A considerable amount of informal education happens outside the school. When kids can share their culture and “teach” it to international outsiders, they learn how to present themselves. At the same time, they learn about the places that international visitors come from, and their interest in these places grows. What often follows is agency and a renewed sense of motivation to do better in school and to pursue higher education. Similarly, sharing and performing music can be a great source of knowledge. Following the past events, Jelenlét Pont’s music program reported increased interest and higher attendance among local children. This way, Udvar Festival strengthened motivation for music education.

Number 10: Reduced Inequalities: Again, Udvar Festival aids in empowering the Roma community and advocates for the beauty of its culture in an international context. In other words, Udvar Festival empowers citizens. This has a two-fold effect: Strengthened pride and agency within the Roma community, as well as raised awareness of the unfair Roma discrimination throughout Europe (and the rest of the world). These sentiments will strengthen mobilization and resistance to discrimination.

This relates to Number 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities. As previously mentioned, Udvar Festival is a meeting place for locals and

creates an inclusive space for community events. More resilience and understanding of community ties will automatically lead to more inclusive living conditions.

Number 16: Peace, justice, and strong institutions: The festival's emphasis on cultural exchange, understanding, and empowerment aligns with SDG 16. By fostering dialogue, empathy, and community engagement, the festival contributes to building more cohesive and resilient societies, where individuals are empowered to advocate for their rights and address social injustices.

Number 17: Sustainable Development: The long-term goal of the Udvar Festival is to strengthen communal ties within Arló and with neighboring villages. By empowering the inhabitants, especially children, the project fosters the region's long-term sustainable development. Udvar Festival itself aims to network with Romani organizations throughout Europe and thereby facilitate social renovation.

Lessons learned

The first festival took place in May 2022. Four hundred people participated over the two days; most were locals, but a group of around 30 international guests also attended, whom we reached mainly through our university network. The first edition of the festival was quite small, and it was apparent that the spontaneity with which we organized the project, although necessary, was a problem. Many artists interested in the initiative had to decline our offer because they were already booked. We faced the same problem with food stalls. We only managed to organize one small food stall because the notice was too short for all the others. However, we managed to pull up a stage, fill it with live music, and attract many guests to the festival, creating an atmosphere none of us imagined possible. Our strength, on the other hand, was our continuous presence in the village. During the two months of organization, we lived in Arló and got to know its inhabitants on a personal level. The children were the first to invite us into their lives; the adults followed after some hesitation. Soon, we were invited into private homes and spoke with the people in

the village about their needs and wants, the meaning of music, and their hopes and expectations for the festival. We earned mutual trust and created a festival truly tailored to the village. Thereby, Udvar festival became part of Arlo and Arlo became part of us. This ensured that the Udvar festival would turn into a long-term project.

We had much more time to plan the second edition of the festival, so we decided to make it a little bigger. We decided to organize a three-day camp for the children preceding the festival and to diversify the attractions a bit, for example, by including various workshops and a theatre performance. However, to grow, we needed additional funding beyond university resources. Finding enough funding remains one of our main struggles. This year, we got involved with GLOCO and achieved the GEPARD award, but most other options for funding failed. Growing in size also meant we had to better organize our structure. In the first year, the four of us did it all together; in the following year, we divided our work into clearly defined roles and involved additional volunteers with specific responsibilities. This turned the once spontaneously created Udvar festival into a real social initiative. As a result, many more people joined our cause, and the team grew and changed.

In 2024, the Udvar festival took place for a third time, with a much larger team involved. It was clearly visible that we entered some sort of routine in the organization of the festival, and that many things are working because we learned how to solve them. For example, we tackled the problem of the food stalls by asking local women to cook for us. In addition, we focused on inviting lesser-known Roma performers so that their art can be shared with a wider audience, refocusing on our initial goal to promote Romani culture. Over the next year, we aim to involve even more locals in organizing the festival to make it as community-managed as possible and as little dependent on us as possible.

Fig. 7: Udvar festival teampic



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The lessons learned in the past years are many. I think the main one is to really be present in the place where we built the social initiative, to do it with the locals, not for the locals, without even knowing them. For example, in the first year, the village's mayor suddenly forbade us from selling alcohol at the festival, claiming it would lead to uncontrollable crowds. We complied because this rule was tied to the festival's license. When we got to know the village better, we understood that alcoholism is a considerable problem in the village, and we found our own reason to keep alcohol away from the festival: to hold a positive example of how we can come together and enjoy this festival without alcohol consumption. It is not banned on the festival grounds, but it is not sold, and the organizing team does not drink. By this, we manage to turn the focus slightly away from alcohol. Another important lesson for us was to trust the locals beyond our stereotypes. Before we got to the village, we were told to be careful because theft would be a big problem. So far, the only thing

that was ever stolen at Udvar Festival was a pack of sweets from a tent. The children who stole the sweets were later turned into guardians, with the responsibility to ensure no one would steal or destroy what was not theirs. We learned to trust the people we encountered, to empower them instead of misjudging them.

For further reading

'Emerging Settlements' (2022). "Steps for Catching up". Belüginizterium, Hungary. https://fete.hu/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Emerging-settlements_BM.pdf

For more context, regard this policy recommendation for social action aimed at improving the situation in Roma settlements in Hungary. Out of this recommendation/political action, state-funded social organizations were brought into villages with Roma settlements. Jelenlét, the partner organization of Udvar Festival, is one of them.

Újvári, Péter Ádám (2023). "Human to Human": The Politics of Recognition in the Rural Local Contexts of Hungarian Roma Exclusion/Inclusion. Vienna: Central European University. Print. https://libsearch.ceu.edu/permalink/43CEU_INST/p803t6/alma991003607767708861

Peter Ujvari, one of Udvar's team members, wrote his bachelor's thesis on the politics of (non)recognition of the Roma communities in Hungary using Arló, the village in which the festival takes place, as his main case study. This source can be useful to get more information about and insight into the realities of the village and its Roma community.

Meskimmon, Marsha (2011). 'Making Worlds, Making Subjects: Contemporary Art and the Affective Dimension of Global Ethics'. *World Art* 1 (2): 189–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21500894.2011.602716>. 26. 2017. 'From the Cosmos to the Polis: On Denizens, Art and Postmigration Worldmaking'. *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, August. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/20004214.2017.1343082>.

To better understand Udvar's philosophy, I suggest readings from Mar-

sha Meskimmon, who underlines the importance of art in moving beyond prejudice and to a postmigrant community.

Peterlini, Rahel (2024): The Art of Reimagination South Tyrol. How Artist's Engagement with Migration Creates new Understandings of Belonging, Home, and Community. Vienna: CEU. https://www.etd.ceu.edu/2024/peterlini_rahel.pdf

Bayala, Eric (2017). *Widerklang der Seele*. Verein Sahel Tirol. <https://minorities.at/widerklang-der-seele-ein-film-von-eric-bayala/>. 2021. *Zeitdreher*innen*. Verein Sahel Tirol. <http://www.saheltirol.at/events/film-screening-zeitdreherinnen.html>.

Lastly, I suggest that, if able, you take a look at these two documentary movies about inclusion and intercultural togetherness through art. Unfortunately, the movies are not open source. The main language used is German.