

Researcher's report to OSA

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The emergence of the Roma rights movement in the last years of communism and its immediate aftermath.

My doctoral research has uncovered important alliances and interlinkages between Roma rights advocates and the international Helsinki movement that not only lent its resources to this minority cause but also acted as a key advocate for Roma rights in international organisations as well as national legislatures and administrations ranging from the United States of America to Western European countries.

During the research at OSA I first sought to complement previous research with archival materials concerning legal mobilisation for Roma rights in the so-called Roma dense countries of Central and South-eastern Europe, namely the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. I was interested in organisations related to the Open Society Institute and national Soros Foundations that provided the organisational backbone and resource base of the movement. I was given access to holdings from the Hungarian and Bulgarian Soros Foundations, which allowed me to compare the very different trajectories of supporting the political and legal mobilization of Roma and human rights NGOs in the 1990s. I found that while the Hungarian Soros Foundation prioritized both political and legal mobilization from early on (1993) and created a comprehensive program for the Roma spearheaded by the issue specific Roma Board – which collaborated with Roma-related programs within the Open Society Institute Budapest – the Bulgarian Soros Foundation began to support similar initiatives in earnest only around 1997. I found pieces of internal email correspondence within OSI that are key to my understanding of this global donor's policy approaches to the Roma, including important shifts in the second half of the 1990s. I looked at ten boxes related to the Hungarian Soros Foundation – still in the process of cataloguing, therefore not reproduceable - and two on the Bulgarian SF.

Second, I studied the Roma-related activities of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights - a pivotal non-governmental ally and advocate of Roma rights in the early years of democratic transition. I looked at about 80 boxes more in depth, while browsing through a much larger number. I attach the list of boxes consulted in a separate pdf document. The documents provided further insights on *legally focused* non-governmental organisations populating the Roma rights field in the 1990s. They reveal a story-line between the dominant discourse and the Critical Roma Narrative about *white* Europeans in the Roma rights field. A surprising finding is that despite its early engagement with Roma rights through “Sonia’s Gypsy project” - an undertaking by IHF in various Western and Eastern countries, spearheaded by Sonia Licht of the Yugoslav Helsinki Committee – and OSI’s interest in the Roma, the two organizations did not collaborate on this issue in a meaningful way. “Sonia’s Gypsy project” was inspired by inter-governmental processes within the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, although seemingly initiated by Licht and Djuric on behalf of the Yugoslav Helsinki Committee and the “International Roma Association”. The IHF executive committee decided in November 1990 to publish reports on minority rights, but the geographic and material scope of these reports was shaped by Licht. Some of these reports – covering Bulgaria and Romania – are available on the internet and suggest the influence of the US-based Human Rights Watch but the IHF fond shows the agency of Eastern European and Roma activists, and an interest in Europe overall, not just the East. Still, the documents raise the question of why HRW covered Romania and Bulgaria, where it wanted to boost the organizational basis of the human rights field, and where NATO held particular interest due to the brewing Yugoslav crisis.

The IHF fond also provides insights into the agency of Roma (rights) activists collaborating with IHF: Nicolae Gheorghe (IRU), Rajko Djuric (IRA) and the Human Rights Project (Bulgaria), as well as its leader, Dimitrina Petrova, who combined her Roma rights activities with work on police ill-treatment under the auspices of IHF-funded projects. The fond also provides evidence of the enabling effect in the

early 1990s of interethnic collaboration between Roma rights advocates, IHF and other mainstream (white) human rights NGOs (FIDH, Amnesty International and the Minority Rights Group International). The Helsinki process and IHF played such a key role in the work of Nicolae Gheorghe on Romaphobic violence in Romania that he established a Romani Helsinki Committee within the International Romani Union. The fond holds hand-written faxes between Gheorghe and mainstream human rights activists, attesting to the importance of interethnic collaboration. It also holds the only documents I have seen so far about the work of the Human Rights Project, which was the first Roma-specific, legally focused NGO in the CEE region. All in all, the archival documents bear relevance for current debates and research into Roma (rights) mobilisation – especially inter-ethnic collaboration supporting it - that are yet unexplored in the law and social movements tradition, while being disregarded in Romani studies and its recent critical iterations.