THE PHILANTHROPY OF GEORGE SOROS

BUILDING OPEN SOCIETIES

CHUCK SUDETIC

With an Essay by
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and an Afterword by
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CHAPTER 8

Asserting the Rights of the Roma

Europeans have reviled the Roma people as gypsies, thieves, pickpockets, and beggars ever since the first Roma immigrated from the Indian subcontinent during the Middle Ages. Over the centuries, Europeans have enslaved Roma women, men, and children, beaten them up, burned them out, and bludgeoned them off to the periphery of the next town, and the next, and the next. The Ottoman and Habsburg authorities tried and failed to halt the nomadic migrations of the Roma across Europe. The Nazis and their nationalist allies in Eastern Europe deemed the Roma to be a "criminal and antisocial element," herded them into camps, and shipped them in cattle cars to the gas chambers at Auschwitz.

After World War II, Communist bloc governments tried to assimilate the Roma into the general populations of their countries. During these efforts, many Roma obtained state jobs requiring the dirtiest, most hazardous work. Some Roma also got state apartments and an education, but the vast majority remained mired in poverty and ignorance, inhabiting burgeoning shantytowns, or *màhale* in the Roma language, situated on the outskirts of cities and towns. At a time when the Roma birthrate was outstripping that of the majority populations in the countries where they lived, some doctors even sterilized Roma

women without their knowledge or consent. The practice of coercive sterilization persisted even after the fall of Communism in democratic countries such as the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

The fall of Communism had a sharp impact on the Roma of Eastern Europe and the states that emerged from the former Soviet Union. It removed the social safety net on which so many impoverished Roma relied for job opportunities, public welfare, health care, education (such as it was), and other state benefits. According to *The Economist*, at the beginning of the new millennium, Europe's Roma were suffering the continent's highest level of unemployment, lowest level of education, highest degree of welfare dependence, highest rate of imprisonment, and worst segregation.[1] Hunger and malnutrition, bad hygiene and health practices born of deprivation, squalid housing in communities without plumbing or sanitation, substandard health care, substance abuse, and other factors kept their infant mortality high and reduced their life expectancy to Europe's shortest.

Even before the economic downturn of 2008, right-wing political leaders in Eastern Europe were fomenting hatred of the Roma in order to win popular support on the cheap. Their messages of intolerance resonated widely. Some people in Hungary, the Czech Republic, Romania, and other countries were willing to carry out acts of violence. Six Roma were murdered in Hungary during a spree of nine attacks over fourteen months that ended in November 2009. The killers invaded the home of an impoverished Roma widow, shot her to death, and wounded her thirteen-year-old daughter. They gunned down a Roma factory worker as he was walking to his job. They set fire to the house of a twenty-seven-year-old Roma man and his five-year-old son and shot them to death. (Hungarian police mounted an unprecedented manhunt, and in late August arrested four

suspects, including men adorned with swastika tattoos.) In April 2009, in a town near the city of Ostrava in the Czech Republic, neo-Nazis tossed firebombs into a house where nine Roma were living; two received minor injuries, but a two-year-old girl suffered burns over 80 percent of her body. During November 2009, two medical students in Romania killed and dismembered a sixty-five-year-old Roma man and left his remains in the trunk of a car.

George Soros's network of foundations has spearheaded an unprecedented effort to organize Europe's Roma and assist them in a campaign to secure their rightful position in European society.

To achieve this goal, the Soros-backed effort has exploited opportunities created by Eastern Europe's transition from Communism. New guarantees of freedom of association and freedom of speech in the former Eastern bloc states for the first time gave Roma the legal right to organize themselves independently and to demand respect for their civil liberties as well as access to all of the social benefits provided by their home countries. The eastward expansion of the European Union moreover gave many Roma the freedom to migrate across international frontiers in search of employment and better opportunities and to demand the protections guaranteed in European Union documents defining and elaborating human and civil rights.

The Open Society Foundations helped establish Roma organizations that work to defend the civil liberties of the Roma people vis-à-vis both their national governments and the European Union authorities. In 1995, Aryeh Neier, a number of Roma leaders, and several lawyers experienced in Roma issues met in Prague and founded the European Roma Rights Centre, an international public interest organization that assists the

Roma with strategic litigation, international advocacy, research and policy development, and training of Roma activists. From 2003, the Open Society Foundations and the World Bank became major backers of the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005–2015, an unprecedented international initiative that committed its signatory states to combat discrimination against the Roma, to halt exclusion of the Roma from society, to break the cycle of poverty that has trapped them, and to close the gap in welfare and living conditions between the Roma and the overall population.

By 2010, the Decade of Roma Inclusion had been endorsed by twelve European countries and focused on four main issues: education, health, housing, and employment.

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Education. About 25 percent of all Roma people and 33 percent of Roma women are illiterate. Lack of education is one of the factors most responsible for the abject poverty suffered by many of Europe's eight to twelve million Roma. A survey by the United Nations indicated that about 40 percent of Roma children never attend school, and about 66 percent do not complete the primary grades. Roma children who attend school do so, on average, for less than half as long as children from the majority populations of the countries in which the Roma live. Moreover, the schools most Roma children attend are segregated and inferior. Some Roma parents do not recognize the value of education. Some parents cannot afford basic school supplies or appropriate clothing for their children. Some fear that their children will become victims of violence and bullying.

George Soros and the Open Society Foundations have worked to overcome this chronic education problem through their com-

mitment to the Roma Education Fund, which works to bring increasing numbers of Roma to school as students, teachers, and teaching assistants. The fund's programs provide scholarships for Roma students, lunches to overcome the "hunger barrier" to school attendance for children from households on the brink of penury, academic support to help poor children catch up with their peers, and teacher training to create better schools for all children. To act as positive role models for Roma children, the fund promotes Roma teachers; Roma community and political leaders; Roma lawyers, doctors, and other professionals; as well as Roma young people who have succeeded in school. By late 2009, the fund had assisted about 156,000 Roma children and young adults.

School Segregation: Czech Republic. Julius Mika remembers his first day of third grade well. It was September 1997. There was a bus ride with his parents, eight stops through his hometown, the city of Ostrava in the Czech Republic. Their destination was not the regular primary school where Mika had finished second grade, but a special school for children with developmental disabilities. There were only seven children in Mika's class in the special school, a big change from the thirty-four kids in his second grade classroom. Five of the second graders had been Roma kids, like Mika; he was one of three sent to the special school; the two others were transferred to another class. This, even to eight-year-old Mika, did not seem right. He asked his parents why he and his friends were not going to the regular school anymore.

"The teacher didn't like Roma," Mika said during an interview twelve years later. "She took it upon herself to have me transferred to the special school. Other children were rewarded with a stamp, a piggy or a doggy, for good behavior. She told me

I would never get one." Mika completed four grades in the special school. "Two years were for nothing," he said. "I was studying things I had already learned in the first and second grades. The subjects were all taught at a slower pace. There was no depth. I was doing homework for my cousin in the ninth grade at the special school. I was bored." Mika's mother and father complained to school officials. Soon even the special school's principal said Mika did not belong in a program for children with special needs, including children with intellectual disabilities.

For years, over half of all Roma children in Ostrava's public schools were barred from regular classes and relegated to such special schools, where they comprised over half of the student body. Most Roma children who remained in the regular program were enrolled in segregated Roma schools. These facts amounted to compelling evidence of systematic illegal discrimination and segregation in Ostrava. This pattern was evident in other areas of the Czech Republic as well.

In 1999, Julius Mika became one of eighteen Roma plaintiffs from Ostrava who filed a lawsuit in a domestic court seeking remedy from the government of the Czech Republic for unlawful discrimination. James Goldston, then legal director of the European Roma Rights Centre, conceived the case and represented the plaintiffs. Antidiscrimination legislation barely existed at that time in the countries of Eastern Europe, and the Czech Republic's constitutional court ruled in the government's favor. In 2000, with the support of the European Roma Rights Centre, the plaintiffs appealed the ruling to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. The Czech Republic, as part of the European Union, found itself bound to uphold European Union antidiscrimination laws. Goldston, who became executive director of the Open Society Justice Initiative

in 2002, continued to represent the plaintiffs, appearing before the court twice.

The European Roma Rights Centre also undertook research to reveal the pattern of school discrimination. "I knew how to approach the Roma to get accurate information from them," said Ivan Ivanov, the organization's researcher. "They were reluctant. Few of them believed we could succeed. I had to persuade them that the case would have an impact for thousands of Roma children forced to attend special schools."

In 2007, the court delivered a landmark ruling that segregating Roma students in special schools is a form of unlawful discrimination. During the two years after the ruling, however, the Czech Republic authorities made little or no meaningful effort to correct segregation in education. School officials in Ostrava and other cities and towns were still sending inordinate numbers of Roma children to special schools.

By the time the court handed down its ruling, Mika had finished his education. He had been returned to a regular school, but too late for him to catch up to his peers in math. He ended up completing occupational courses in pastry making and house painting. In 2009, married and a father, he was working from time to time on construction sites and filling his down days by collecting scrap metal. Still, he said, the lawsuit was worth it because it promises to help Roma kids in the future.

Outreach to Roma Parents: Macedonia. In many communities, enrolling Roma children in good schools demands something more than persuading government leaders and school officials to allow them to enter. It requires convincing many Roma parents that education is worth the effort involved in enrolling their children, ensuring that they attend class each day, and making

sacrifices—some as basic as obtaining hand-me-down clothing and, despite the lack of running water at home, making sure the children have bathed—so schoolmates do not subject the Roma pupils to ridicule or worse.

Ristem Muslievski, thirty-three, was a journalist before he became an outreach worker for the National Roma Centrum, a Roma organization and Open Society Foundations grantee in Kumanovo, Macedonia. In 2007, Kumanovo school officials opened the town's best schools to Roma students for the first time. Muslievski began moving through Kumanovo's Roma *mahala* and urging parents to enroll their children and to keep sending them to school.

Many parents were reluctant. Some told Muslievski that they did not know where the assigned school was located—even though it was only a few blocks away—and they feared that their children might get lost on the way or run afoul of bullies. "We take the most vulnerable kids—the poorest kids, the kids who don't know the Macedonian language, the kids whose parents are less enthusiastic—and drive them to school in a van, about eighty of them," Muslievski said. "Maybe four of the eighty would attend classes if we didn't do this. We have to keep talking to the families. We warn them that there is a fine if they do not send their children to school." One first grader, for instance, a tiny girl named Violeta with big, piercing eyes, disappeared from her classroom in mid-October. Muslievski later learned that she was traveling during the weekdays to the town of Tetovo, where she was living in a tent and waiting beside her mother as she begged on the street. "We went to the parents many times," Muslievski said. "We explained to them what education means." It was mid-December before Violeta's parents allowed her to return to school. By February, she had caught up with her classmates.

Desegregation and Teaching Assistants: Bulgaria. The twin doors to the Prince Alexander Elementary School in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, are cut from heavy wood and tower far over the heads of its first graders. By 2007, three years had passed since they opened to the first Roma children taking part in a desegregation program implemented in dozens of schools in nine Bulgarian cities. The program involved some three thousand pupils, about one in every eleven of Bulgaria's school-age Roma children. "People once thought the Roma were incapable of being educated and did not want to be educated," said Donka Panayotova, then a forty-nine-year-old schoolteacher from the town of Vidin who initiated the desegregation process in 2000 with the Open Society Foundations' support. "We have proven that Roma children can be educated in the mainstream and that their results are much higher than those of the Roma kids who are in segregated schools."

In 2007, thirty-two-year-old Asen Karagyozov was working at the Association of Roma Youth in Plovdiv's *mahala*, Stolipinovo, a drab array of prefabricated concrete apartment blocks surrounded by shops, garages, and streets neglected by the city's road crews and garbage collectors. Karagyozov and his father, Anton, founder of one of Bulgaria's first Roma nongovernmental organizations, were helping to operate a program to bus Roma children accompanied by Roma teaching assistants from Stolipinovo to Prince Alexander and other elementary schools in the city's center. About two hundred Roma children were participating in the desegregation program. Another 3,300 were attending a segregated school in the *mahala*. "No Bulgarian would come here to Stolipinovo to go to school," Karagyozov said. Zhivka Boshnakova, the mother of a Roma second grader in the desegregation program, knew why. "I went to the *mahala* school," she said. "I know my son reads, writes, and knows math better than children who are still going there."

English Scholarships: Bulgaria. The three of them were in their early twenties in 2007. Each had felt the slap of discrimination and the sting of personal loss. Each was the living antithesis of a stereotype. Zina Tenekedzieva, a speaker of French, German, Bulgarian, Turkish, and Romany, the language of the Roma, had earned degrees in medicine and social work. Her mother had died of kidney failure after a long struggle that sapped her family's assets; her father was an ailing former steelworker and professional accordionist. Bulgaria's former national champion in women's judo, Raina Becheva had graduated from the national sports academy before a devastating injury cost her an Olympic dream. Rosen Asenov had languished in a segregated Roma school until a Bulgarian teacher helped his father, who works in a car battery factory, and his mother, a teacher, obtain his transfer to a Bulgarian school.

Tenekedzieva, Becheva, and Asenov were recipients of Open Society Foundations scholarships designed to foster the development of prospective Roma leaders by giving them the opportunity to study English in an eight-month postgraduate language course at the American University in Bulgaria. Mastering English enables young Roma to advocate at the EU level and compete for Open Society Foundations–funded internships with the European Commission, OSCE, and Council of Europe.

The life experiences of Tenekedzieva, Becheva, and Asenov have tempered their ambitions. "I've seen how some people from government institutions mistreat Roma people," Tenekedzieva said. "I was discriminated against by a college professor who did not like the Roma part of me. My sister lost her job because the other workers said she was a gypsy and refused to work with her." Despite the setbacks and barriers, Tenekedzieva is committed to helping her people and contributing to Bulgaria's

larger society. "I want a job in some institution, in a municipality or ministry," she said. "I want to work with our people, especially our women, because they need someone to protect them from discrimination."

For Becheva, judo meant freedom and achievement: "Roma girls need to break free. They withdraw into themselves. The environment of the *mahala* closes in around them. They have choices, but they don't know them. They don't know the possibilities. They get married very young. They have many children very young. They don't go to school. They remain illiterate. Sports are a way to break free. Judo gives you a sense of strength, a way to defend yourself, and something useful to do with your time. So I want to establish a judo club for girls."

Asenov was preparing to attend the Central European University in Budapest and to work in a Roma organization or in the European Union in some capacity helping Roma community development. "When I see the children begging on the streets, I see the politics, I see that they are not educated, I see that they have no options. Organized crime selects kids like this," he said. "It is time for us to obtain positions in the government. It is time for us to define our interests and our rights. It is time to improve our position in the broader community. We learn fast. And we will destroy these stereotypes forever."

* * *

Health. There is a paucity of reliable data on the health problems Europe's Roma suffer. Many Roma know little about good hygiene and health. Too many navigate the world of health leaflets and hospital forms through the fog of illiteracy and poor language proficiency. Often they lack health insurance and the money to pay the informal "gratuity" doctors in some Eastern

European countries depend on to augment their low salaries. In some countries, the average life expectancy for the Roma is ten years shorter than the average for the majority population, and the infant mortality rates for Roma are twice as high. Throughout the region, Roma suffer disproportionate rates of tuberculosis, HIV and AIDS, viral hepatitis, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, adult obesity, malnutrition, anemia, dystrophy, and childhood rickets. Human rights groups have documented instances of ambulance services refusing to respond to calls for help from Roma *màhale*. In *Ambulance Not on the Way: The Disgrace of Health Care for Roma in Europe*, for example, the European Roma Rights Centre reported that the practice of not sending ambulances to Roma neighborhoods was common in some parts of Bulgaria and Hungary, endangering the health and lives of Roma in need of emergency services.

The crucial component of the Open Society Foundations' effort to help break down barriers that keep the Roma from accessing quality health care services is the Roma Health Project, a subset of the Public Health Program. By collaborating with other programs and grantees of the Foundations, the Roma Health Project is fostering the development of sound public health policies across Central and Eastern Europe—and especially in six priority countries: Bulgaria, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Ukraine. It has initiated programs to respond to the challenges of HIV and sexually transmitted diseases, tuberculosis, and drug addiction. The Roma Health Project also supported an advocacy campaign aimed at obtaining justice and compensation for Roma women who were victims of coerced sterilization.

Health Mediators: Romania. The Open Society Foundations and its partners have supported the work of health mediators,

most of them Roma women, who liaise between the Roma community and the health care system in Romania, Ukraine, and other Eastern European countries. The health mediators inform Roma of their rights and help document cases of discrimination in health care settings. They help Roma obtain the documents required to gain access to state health care services. They calm tempers when disagreements arise between Roma and medical professionals.

It took Carmen Andrei, a health mediator in Romania, longer than expected to gain the trust of a community of about 250 Roma living beside Vânători, a town in the eastern foothills of the Carpathian Mountains. Andrei made visits to Vânători's Roma community for over a year in an effort to convince them to participate in a vaccination program. Yet they ignored her appeals. Though Andrei was herself a Roma, Vânători's Roma considered her a *gadjo*, someone from outside the Roma community. The only person who could help Andrei was the community's elder or *bulibasha*.

Lacatus Codrea had gathered many insights tempered by adversity during his years as *bulibasha*. He saw a mob torch Vânători's Roma community, chase his people into a forest, and raze every structure the flames had spared. Fifteen years passed as Codrea pleaded with local officials to issue the Roma building permits so they could improve the dirt-floored shanties they had clapped together to shelter themselves and their children. "We were not allowed to rebuild our homes," he said.

For decades, Codrea watched as neighbors succumbed to violence and alcohol abuse. He saw children grow to adulthood without being vaccinated or properly nourished. He saw pregnant Roma women go without medical support. Codrea's thirteen-year-old granddaughter, Adina, once lay partially paralyzed for hours after touching a live power cable; he had erupted

in anger at doctors and nurses who refused to examine and treat her. "The first time Andrei came, she started talking and didn't stop for half an hour," Codrea said. "Back then, when someone tried to give me advice that was good for me, I would ask myself, 'Why is he giving me this advice?' I had no trust."

Codrea said the change came when Andrei learned to listen. Andrei said that a measles outbreak finally convinced Vânători's Roma to seek vaccination for themselves and their children. Whatever the reason, Codrea persuaded the Roma of Vânători to listen to Andrei. "Now, if she speaks," Codrea said, "it is impossible for people not to listen to her. Now the local general practitioner knows all of us. The women go to the doctor. The children are vaccinated."

Yet there is still more work to be done. "The problem now lies with the hospital," said Codrea. "The doctors in nearby hospitals expect to be paid a tip, *baksheesh*, to provide care." A tip for medical services is a commonplace form of payment in Eastern Europe for Roma and non-Roma alike. "If you don't have the money, you die outside." This is another reason why it is important to address the paucity of Roma working in medicine.

Medical School Scholarships. In the autumn semester of 2008, the Open Society Foundations began funding scholarships for Roma students to pursue degrees in medicine, nursing, pharmacology, and related disciplines at accredited schools and universities in Romania. By the beginning of 2010, the program had sixty-three scholars in Romania and twenty-three in Bulgaria, with more to come in Serbia and Macedonia. The main goal of the scholarship program for Roma medical students is to increase significantly the presence of Roma doctors in hospitals, not just to provide patient care but also to deter

discrimination and other abuses. For this reason, the recipients of the first Roma health scholarships in Romania were selected not only based upon academic merit and professional motivation but upon leadership skills. The applicants attended Open Society Foundations–supported training programs to help them become effective advocates for Roma rights in health care settings.

On a September morning in 2008, Carmen Andrei brought applicants for the Roma health scholarships to Vânători to meet and take counsel from Codrea and other members of his community. With few exceptions, the scholarship applicants were Roma who had schooling and jobs and resided in integrated neighborhoods in towns and cities. The students had to learn firsthand about the hardships endured by less fortunate Roma who huddled in substandard housing on the fringes of society.

The scholarship applicants and their mentors—Romanians who were nearing completion of medical school—crowded into the sitting room to hear the *bulibasha*. Most of them had never visited a Roma settlement like Vânători. The students and mentors listened in silence as the *bulibasha* told of Andrei's communication problem, of the lack of vaccinations, and of how, two years earlier, he had come upon his granddaughter Adina lying still on the ground next to the power cable. Codrea took her in a horse cart to a nearby clinic. In the clinic's car they went to a hospital, then to a pediatric center, and then back to the hospital. "The first doctor didn't want to touch me," said Adina. "I was sick to my stomach and my feet and hands were paralyzed. He did not want to touch me."

Codrea argued with a doctor and finally took Adina into a room and put her on a table. "The doctor was unhappy," he said. "He was threatening. And I think I spoke badly, but the child was

worse and worse, and I had waited for two hours." Adina spent several weeks in the hospital recovering from the electric shock she had received.

Codrea advised the students and mentors how to speak when dealing with Roma. "This is a group that gets angry easily. When they speak loudly, it doesn't mean that they are bad. They think this is the way to get action. You have to be patient. You have to listen. If you don't, the person will conclude that you have something against them."

After several hours, the students and mentors left. "I have heard of places like this," said Corina Stanciu, a medical student from the city of Ploieşti. "I have seen Roma begging on the streets, but I haven't seen Roma like these. Where I live, Roma have houses, not like this. I could not want to be a doctor any more than I want to be one now."

* * *

Helping the Roma Stand Up and Be Counted. Beyond the areas of education and health care, the Open Society Foundations have helped Roma organizations in Eastern Europe to assert the presence of the Roma in the broader community in a number of ways: by working for an accurate accounting of their numbers, which can yield a fairer share of state benefits and political power; by documenting their past, which has largely been ignored; and by pressing their governments to honor the commitments made in the Decade of Roma Inclusion. The Roma population is notoriously understated in official statistics. On census forms and other official documents, many Roma have refused to identify themselves as Roma, and thousands of Roma are not registered with the authorities at all. In Europe's popular memory, the Roma and their culture barely exist beyond stereo-

typical characterizations, and certainly not as victims of Nazi genocide. In the halls of power of the countries where the Roma live, their needs have been ignored for too long.

Obtaining Identity Documents. In her twenty-four years, Roziana Zakiri never learned to read or write. She did not know how to tell time. And until early autumn 2007, Zakiri did not officially exist in the land of her birth, Macedonia, or anywhere else on the planet for that matter. A house fire consumed the only official paper she had with her name on it: a copy of a form her mother got from the hospital on the day Zakiri was born.

Zakiri's mother never obtained an official birth certificate or a personal identification card for her daughter. So Zakiri went through life without health insurance and social benefits. No school record indicated she ever attended a single day of class. No certificate vouches for her marriage to a man, Safet, who was also not recorded on official registers. None of their five children had birth certificates. When Zakiri was in labor with her twins in early 2006, the local hospital sent her away because she had no national health card. Zakiri gave birth to a boy and a girl in a crumbling one-room brick house to which she and Safet hold no title. The house sits on a plot of land about twenty feet by fifteen for which they hold no deed.

In the fall of 2007, for tending a farmer's livestock, Safet was bringing home the equivalent of about $50 a month and occasionally some milk and cheese. Zakiri said that she brought in the equivalent of about $4 a day begging on the streets of Kumanovo, a few miles from Macedonia's border with Serbia. "We would often start in front of the post office," Zakiri said. "The children would sit beside me while I begged. We'd walk back and forth to the center of town. When the twins were really small, I would have slings for them, one in the front, one in back."

Two years earlier, in 2005, Asmet Elezovski, founder and manager of the Open Society Foundations–supported National Roma Centrum, spotted Roziana and her children begging in front of a store. "She was a new face, so I knew she was not from Kumanovo. After that, I sent a team to check things out. We appealed to her several times to come to us for help. One morning in the winter of 2005–2006, she showed up at the office very early. Her mother-in-law was seriously ill. Roziana was pregnant with her twins. She was seeking help. We began by trying to get her emergency aid and a doctor's examination. Then we asked about her documents, and we found she had none and had no money to obtain them."

The field workers at the National Roma Centrum had seen many complicated registration problems before. But even the officials at the government offices did not know where to begin with Zakiri. It took until September 2007 to obtain Zakiri's personal identification card. Her five children obtained birth certificates by October, and her eldest daughter, eight-year-old Serdjana, entered the first grade. The authorities assigned a social worker to Zakiri's case and obtained welfare benefits for her. But health cards had still not arrived by the New Year. With the health cards, Zakiri could obtain additional security and protection for her children: She could get them vaccinated.

Media Mentors. Years ago, Serbia's Roma might have accepted without protest a government decision to terminate a school program that was benefiting their children; and even if the Roma had protested, no radio or television station would have reported it. Until recently, Roma in Romania would never have seen a documentary film about killings of vast numbers of their people during the *Porrajmos*, the Great Devouring, the Roma term for the Holocaust.

To rectify this situation, since the mid-1990s, the Open Society Media Program has assisted Roma organizations across the region to enhance their use of the mass media. One of the Media Program's components provides mentors to Roma organizations who help develop the skills of broadcast professionals and filmmakers. Their work is crucial to bridging the gap between the Roma people and the societies from which they have been alienated for so many centuries.

When the 2007–2008 academic year began in the sprawling city of Niš, Serbia, the school authorities announced the cancellation of a program that had placed Roma monitors in primary schools with significant numbers of Roma children. By all accounts, this program had been a success. The monitors were providing assistance to teachers and parents and were instilling confidence in Roma schoolchildren at ethnically mixed schools, especially Roma pupils who needed help with the Serbian language. Dropout rates for Roma students fell. The performance of the Roma children improved. The decision to eliminate the monitors was made without input from parents or teachers and effected without an official explanation.

Serbia's first Roma broadcast outlets, Nišava Radio and Television in Niš, took up the elimination of the school monitors for an episode of a television magazine that deals with local Roma issues. "If Roma children don't know the Serbian language well and finish poorly on a placement test, they are sent to a special school for slow or retarded children," said Goran Jovanović, program manager. "So the monitors were having a direct, beneficial effect on the lives of the children."

Nišava Radio and Television had produced effective reportage before. One radio program focused for five days in a row on a neglected, rutted mud track to a Roma neighborhood; on the sixth day, the Niš authorities sent out a paving crew. The station's

reporters had pressed managers of the local electrical utility to explain why a Roma settlement had no power. They had confronted the local health authorities about problems Roma women were having obtaining cancer treatment. They reported on murders, small thefts, and begging. The station had publicized a microcredit program, and dozens of Roma, many of them illiterate, had come for help to learn more about the program and fill out forms. But the broadcasters themselves considered Nišava's television reporting uneven and knew that, in spite of their efforts, it was failing to enhance either the Romas' self-image or the image Serbs have of the Roma.

In an effort to sharpen their productions, the Roma broadcasters began receiving advice from a freelance broadcast media trainer, Radmila Dulović Rastovac, who had become the station's mentor under the Open Society Foundations' program. "They call on me night and day," Dulović Rastovac said. "I taught them to define what they want to present and why. Their goal was to show the Serbian audience their problems, so the broader community can better understand them." After consulting Dulović Rastovac, the Roma broadcasters decided to produce a television magazine with each segment focusing on a pressing issue related to health care, housing, education, and jobs.

To capture the Serbian audience, however, they had to go further. "I taught them to ask pointed questions of the appropriate authorities," Dulović Rastovac said. "I also told them that without a story in each episode of their magazine about successful Roma, about positive examples of individuals in the Roma community, Serbs would not watch. There had to be a mix."

"Radmila changed my whole view of television," said Damir Barčić, editor of the television magazine. "She showed us how to

produce a segment based only on facts." The station put this new orientation to work on the school monitors story.

Initially the broadcasters received word that, within several months, the Roma school monitors would resume their work funded by the school system's budget, and not through a donor. But nothing happened. "We went to the school authorities and asked why they did not go forward," Barčić said. "They would not even give a statement. They avoided all contact. So we asked Radmila what to do, and she said do a stand-up in front of the building and explain that the authorities were refusing to speak with us."

Months later the Roma of Serbia had still not received an answer. But the school authorities knew that the Roma broadcasters, and through them the Roma of Niš, were not going to stop asking.

Current events are not the only focus of the media project. So many Roma suffer illiteracy that the past tends to fade away after two or three generations. Even memories of an event as devastating as the Holocaust become murky if they are not recorded. Cristinela Ionescu tried to change this. A Roma woman from a village near the Romanian mining town of Petroşani, she was active in a Roma nongovernmental organization before she began producing documentary films. *The Judge*, a documentary about a Holocaust survivor who became a traditional conflict mediator in the local Roma community, was the first film Ionescu produced with the help of a mentor, Nenad Puhovski of Croatia. "We were already producing films, but they were not so well developed," Ionescu said. "Puhovski worked closely with us and greatly improved the quality." Puhovski in particular helped with the editing and the rough cut. He urged Ionescu's crew to improve sound quality and provided advice on camera work and on shooting special scenes.

He assisted in promoting *The Judge* and arranged an invitation for the film to be shown at the documentary film festival in Zagreb, Croatia's capital city.

The judge, Marin Constantin, the avuncular, graying man Ionescu's film crew followed, was twelve years old when Romania's pro-Nazi wartime regime forcibly deported him and thousands of other Roma across the Bug River to Transnistria, now Moldova, where thousands were killed or died of disease, malnutrition, and exposure.

Constantin managed to survive and after the war began rebuilding his life in Romania. He worked as a waiter and a police officer. When he was thirty-six, the Roma community chose him to be a conflict mediator and enforcer of traditional Roma laws, a function that was valued even by the ruling Ceauşescu regime, because it maintained peace within the Roma community and minimized input from the Communist authorities. Today, a younger generation of Roma, including lawyers and police officers, come to Constantin for assistance.

The Judge made headlines across Romania and galvanized about 250,000 viewers, including its Roma audience, with their first glimpse of the genocide against the Roma during the wartime years. On televisions and viewing screens in auditoriums, meeting halls, and movie houses, the film reignited memories few written words had ever recorded. It opened up discussion of the horrors and accountability and stimulated a hunger to know more.

Monitoring Compliance with the Decade of Roma Inclusion. Young Roma activists are organizing efforts to monitor how well the governments of the countries that have signed on to the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005–2015 are meeting their commitments in the areas of education, employment, health, and housing.

Nadir Redžepi was executive director of the Roma Democratic Development Association until January 2010, when he joined the Open Society Foundations' Local Government and Public Service Reform Initiative as project manager. Among other activities, the association joined with Decade Watch, an organization created by the Open Society Foundations and the World Bank to support local efforts to press governments to meet their commitments. "For the first time in history, Roma from nine countries worked toward the same goal, and we learned by doing," Redžepi said. "At first we thought that, since the state had adopted official policies, changes would come automatically. But changes did not come. So we decided to research what government institutions, international organizations, and Roma nongovernmental organizations were doing. We confirmed that in Macedonia and elsewhere state support was weak. Implementation and official policies on the Roma needed instruments and structures."

Redžepi was present in Sofia, Bulgaria, on June 11, 2007, when George Soros launched Decade Watch's assessment report. "We went to the government with the findings and said we needed implementation immediately," Redžepi said. "We've already seen results in budget lines. We've seen structures put in place. Now they are developing an action plan on Roma women and working on a human rights action plan."

With the support of the Open Society Foundations, a group of young Roma activists, including Toni Tashev, a Roma lawyer who knows firsthand what education is like in a segregated school, formed a nongovernmental organization in Bulgaria, the Regional Policy Development Center, which promotes legislation and government policies to overcome discrimination and also participated in Decade Watch's monitoring project.

For Tashev, the key revelation from the Decade Watch report was that in all the participating countries there is a significant lack of relevant data to assess government compliance with the commitments made in the initiative. "At the moment, we can only assess the inputs made by national authorities, and not the outcomes," Tashev said. "In employment, for example, there are no clear data on how many Roma are covered." In health and housing, improvements are coming only slowly, Tashev added, but in education much more has been achieved.

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The Open Society Foundations helped the Decade for Roma Inclusion, in its first five years, achieve significant progress at the European Union level. The Decade has moved the issue of Roma inclusion from the margins to the center of policy agendas, providing a working template for the European Union to adapt in designing a comprehensive EU Roma policy.

Since its earliest work on Roma issues in the 1990s, the Open Society Foundations pioneered and piloted successful approaches that show in practical terms how integration can and does work. As the Decade of Roma Inclusion moved into its second five-year period, the Open Society Foundations planned to continue to support programs that integrate Roma and improve their lives. Even so, progress in the communities where Roma live has turned out to be slower than expected.

According to Bernard Rorke, the international research and advocacy director for the Open Society Roma Initiatives, advancing the rights and well-being of Roma children remains a priority. In a region characterized by aging populations and falling birthrates, the Roma are the youngest and fastest growing demographic. Another priority is challenging negative

stereotypes and public hostility through support for public information campaigns and the work of Roma film directors and journalists. Roma media organizations needed to be strengthened, and alliances between Roma and non-Roma media organizations established. Following up on public campaigns challenging racism, the Open Society Foundations in 2010 launched a national "Read with Us" campaign targeting children and young people in Hungary to promote integration. The Open Society Foundations were also working to duplicate a successful voter registration drive in Serbia, which registered more than 45,000 Roma, including internally displaced persons, so that Roma in other communities would begin to participate in electoral decisions and gain political power proportionate to their numbers. "If we are to avert a deepening crisis," Rorke said, "there is an urgent need for a comprehensive European Union Roma policy to combat poverty and discrimination, overcome anti-Roma prejudice, and bring an end to segregation."

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GEORGE SOROS

Of all the activities in which my foundations are engaged, addressing the problems facing the Roma is the one with which I have been the most personally involved. The Hungary foundation, established in 1984, drew my attention to the Roma by making them a priority from its inception. The foundation's primary concern was with the preservation of Roma cultural traditions, mainly in music. Education and combating discrimination were other important concerns. The Hungary foundation's main achievement—later replicated by my other

foundations in the region—was to provide mentors and other kinds of support to educate a small, new Roma elite who were conscious of their identity and proud to identify themselves as Roma. There were other Roma who had obtained an education and made their way in the world, but they had ceased to be Roma. They could disappear among the general population because they did not fit the negative stereotype, yet the stereotype would remain. The new elite we had educated held out the prospect of challenging and breaking the stereotype. I have since met many of these new Roma leaders and I have found them impressive and inspiring. They are articulate and motivated, having overcome great odds to become educated.

After the collapse of Communism, the social position of the Roma deteriorated, both in absolute and relative terms. Many Roma had been working in the heavy industries, which were shut down. The unemployment rate jumped as high as 80 to 90 percent in some areas. Also, in Communist times, people had houses or lodgings allocated to them at very low rents. When rents were liberalized, the Roma were forced to leave.

That is when the Roma became a priority program area for my foundations. The character of our programs reflects my personal influence: They are diffuse, diversified, and well funded. They make an impact, but they could be better organized, and we are in the process of dealing with this deficiency.

The Decade of Roma Inclusion and the Roma Education Fund were my creations. They constitute perhaps the first instance where I could achieve something by getting others involved rather than doing things entirely on my own. I cannot consider them an unqualified success: They are moving forward, but only because we keep pushing. Altogether we can be proud of our achievements, but we cannot be content with the results because in absolute numbers the growth of the Roma population is greater than the growth of our programs.

In 2010, the Roma problem finally penetrated the European public's consciousness because of President Sarkozy's antics in

expelling Roma from France. Berlusconi has done worse in Italy, but it did not get as much attention. I regarded this event as an opportunity to get the European Union to pay more attention to the Roma question because the EU alone has the resources to make a real difference, and I am glad to say that the wheels have started turning. This has kept me busy. I have appointed a full-time deputy to coordinate our Roma programs, Kalman Mizsei, so that we shall be better organized. But I intend to remain fully engaged. If not me, who? If not now, when?