

Article

## ‘Letter to Stalin’: Roma Activism vs. Gypsy Nomadism in Central, South-Eastern and Eastern Europe before WWII

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### Abstract

From the beginning, academic research on Gypsies in Western Europe has presented their nomadic way of life as their most important and essential feature, a key pillar of their community identity. Measures for their sedentarisation were perceived as a shackle in a chain of persecutions, and the policy of sedentarisation conducted in the 1950s–1970s in Central, South-Eastern, and Eastern Europe has continuously been interpreted as an example of the crimes of the communist regimes against the human and cultural rights of Roma. What has been missing, however, in these interpretations is the stance on the issue of nomadism as expressed by the Roma themselves and, more specifically, by the Roma civic elite: namely, by the Roma activists who initiated the Roma civic emancipation and created the first Roma organizations in the regions. In recent years, a need to critically re-think the field of Romani Studies in order to take into account the viewpoint of the studied community comes in the foreground of academic and civil society discussions. Such re-consideration is unavoidable also in studying the field of Roma history. This article strives to fill this knowledge gap and to initiate a new discussion about the issue of the so-called Gypsy nomadism. The viewpoints on this issue, coming from the Roma civic elite itself, are presented primarily on the basis of historical evidence from the interwar period, but are not limited to its framework. Finally, later historical developments in the issue of Roma activists’ approach to Gypsy nomadism will also be outlined, including its contemporary dimensions.

### Keywords

Central Europe; Eastern Europe; Gypsy nomadism; interwar period; Roma activism; Roma organizations

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

Up until now, in the field of Roma history research, the main focus has been on the various policies pursued towards Roma/Gypsies, without however showing their own attitudes towards these policies. The major issue here is constituted by the leading predetermined discourse according to which Roma are viewed as passive objects of the policies of authorities rather than as active creators of their own history. In this way, the Roma point of view is de facto absent, and the reaction of the Roma

themselves (or lack thereof) to the policies implemented towards them, as well as their visions about the future of their communities, are neglected. From this point of view, the title of our article refers not only to the specific letters of Roma activists to Stalin (which are discussed later in the text) but more broadly it is a metaphor for the citizens’ requests to authorities. In our case, it expresses the aspirations of the new Roma civic elite to turn the problems of the Roma into a public issue that needs to be addressed by the political class in their respective societies, of which they are an integral part.

A standard explanation for omitting a Roma point of view is that this is due to the lack of sufficient historical sources which present Roma visions. However, the opposite is true. The preserved sources are numerous but, at the same time, under-researched. In reality, as our recent research shows, a huge amount of sources written by Roma or reflecting their views is preserved in archives dispersed in different countries, yet they are still, to a large extent, neglected. For example, until the start of WWII, a total of 19 Roma newspapers and journals (one newspaper in Ottoman Empire, one newspaper in Yugoslavia, three newspapers in Bulgaria, six newspapers in Romania, three journals and one newspaper in Hungary, and two journals and two newspapers in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics [USSR]) were published in the region of Central, South-Eastern, and Eastern Europe (CSEEE). Numerous Roma books and collections of different types also began to be published during this period. We can find such publications in Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Romania, Czechoslovakia, and Latvia. Particularly striking is the case of the early USSR, where a total of 257 books published in the Romani language have thus far been discovered. On top of this, the archives in these countries store a huge amount of a wide variety of other documents written by Roma (for example, statutes and documentation of Roma organizations, letters to institutions, etc.), many of which have not yet been studied. This source base reveals the Roma perspective on a wide variety of public issues which concerned the Roma during this historical period. The type, quality, and number of preserved sources in different countries are different, but it nevertheless enables us to draw an overall picture of the region (with the particular specificities for each country).

At this point, we have to emphasize that this article does not aim to study Roma nomadism in the region nor the state policies for their sedentarisation. The purpose of the article is to present the Roma perspective on community issues (with the example of Gypsy nomadism), as perceived in the context of new civic nations, of which the Roma are also a part. Even though this perspective includes quite diverse and uneven discrete country-specific parts, it is subordinated to a common vision for the future of their community. This forms a common Roma narrative, namely a narrative of the new Roma civic elite, which expresses the ideology of the Roma civic emancipation movement in the region of CSEEE.

The Roma civic emancipation movement began with the transition to the modern age when the level of civic integration of the Roma had already reached a certain level. It could be understood in the backdrop of the general socio-political context of the 19th century, which marked the beginning of modern nationalism in CSEEE. The general social and political processes inevitably exerted their influence on the Roma who lived in these lands. Individual members of the community, which formed its elite, started looking for a new, better balance between the two main dimensions of the exist-

tence of Roma: namely, as a separate ethnic community and as an integral part of the society in which they lived (Marushiakova & Popov, 2016a, p. 15). And this is, in fact, the very process of Roma civic emancipation (which presupposes equality, full social inclusion, and preservation of ethnicity).

Miroslav Hroch's (2000) arguments concerning the formation and evolution of the national movements helps us in better understanding these processes. The emergence of the Roma civic emancipation movement was initiated by a relatively small circle of the Roma elite, at least in the first stages of its development (until WWII) and, accordingly, the second stage (propaganda and the agitation of these national ideas among their ethnic community) covered only a limited circle of their community. This is similar (at least as a model) to the creation of all new modern nations in the region, where it was the elites who created national concepts that became subsequently adopted by the masses (Hroch, 2000). That is why our article is primarily focusing on the visions put forward by the Roma elite and its leading representatives concerning the future of their community, while the attitude of the community itself towards these ideas should be the subject of another study.

## 2. Bulgaria, Serbia/Yugoslavia, and Greece

In the 19th century, new independent nation-states (Greece, Serbia, and Bulgaria) separated from the Ottoman Empire, and it was here that the first civic forms of Roma organizations emerged. A full neglect of the nomadic Gypsies is noticeable from the program documents of all these organizations that were created in the Balkans before WWI by settled Gypsies, such as the First Serbian Gypsy Association, founded in 1890 in Belgrade ("Pokret Cigana," 1922, p. 3), and the Association of Egyptian Nationality from the town of Vidin founded in 1910 in Bulgaria (Ustav, 1910). Also the Gypsy Guilds (Esnafs), that originated under the conditions of the Ottoman Empire (Marushiakova & Popov, 2016b, pp. 76–89) changed their forms and social functions under new conditions and became professional organisation and associations, e.g., the Porter's Association, founded in Lom in 1896 (Tahir, 2018), the Porter's Association 'Labour' in Kyustendil (founded in 1901), the First Sofia Flower-Selling Association 'Future' in Sofia (founded in 1909), among others, all of which were established by settled Gypsies.

The neglect of nomads by their sedentary counterparts is especially visible in the case of Roma suffrage struggles in Bulgaria, where no single Gypsy nomad was present among the participants in the 'First Gypsy Congress,' convoked in 1905, asking for the re-installation of electoral rights revoked from Muslim Gypsies and Gypsy nomads (Marushiakova & Popov, 2017, pp. 38–42). The complete disinterest in Gypsy nomads by activists, all of whom came from sedentary communities, continued in the coming years. In 1919, the

Sofia Common Moslem Educational and Cultural Mutual Aid Organization 'Istikbal—Future' (Bulgaria, 1919) was established. This organization also requested the restoration of the Gypsy suffrage (Pashov, 1957, pp. 101–102). At the end of 1919, a new electoral law was passed, which introduced a compulsory vote for all Bulgarian citizens, and in this way the settled Muslim Gypsies once again obtained their electoral rights; deprived from suffrage remained only persons without a permanent residence (i.e., Gypsy nomads). No voice in their support was raised after the changes in the Election Law, nor even later in the 1930s, when the organization Istikbal was transformed into the Common Mohammedan-Gypsy National Cultural-Educational and Mutual Aid Union. There was no word on Gypsy nomads in the charter of the organization either (Bulgaria, 1933), nor in the *Terbie* newspaper published by this organization in the period 1933–1934. Furthermore, there was also no reaction in 1937, when the suffrage of the nomads was restored within the new ordinance-law on the election of Members of Parliament.

After WWI, in Yugoslavia, the First Serbian Gypsy Association for Mutual Assistance in Sickness and Death was inaugurated in the 1920s. In 1930, the newspaper *Romano lil/Ciganske novine* was published. In 1935, the new Association of Belgrade Gypsies for the Celebration of Aunt Bibia was established, while the Educational Club of Yugoslavian Gypsy Youth, which grew into Yugoslavian-Gypsy Youth, also took shape (Acković, 2001, pp. 43–59). In general, Gypsy nomads are not mentioned at all in the documents and publications of these organizations. Perhaps the only exception is the following text, which makes it clear that Roma activists clearly distinguish themselves from the former:

It is necessary to distinguish between nomadic Gypsies and Gypsies who are permanently inhabiting villages and towns. The nomadic Gypsies do not have a permanent place of residence, nor do they seem to have a sense for it; their moral is in conflict with our morals and they have no sense for what can and cannot be done....The environment controls the moral behaviour of the Gypsy inhabitants in villages and cities, and they take care of being honest. (N[ikolić], 1939, p. 10, authors' translation)

In Greece, the Panhellenic Cultural Association of the Greek Gypsies was founded in Athens in 1939 (Marushiakova & Popov, in press). It is clear from the recently discovered organization's statute that its members lived sedentarily, and there are no historical records that it has ever engaged in the problems of Gypsy nomads.

In summary, the attitude of the pioneers of the Roma civic emancipation in the Balkans concerning Gypsy nomads in the period up to WWII can be reduced to total ignorance (and only in some cases a firm distinction from them).

### 3. Romania

A clear vision in the attitude of Roma activists towards the nomadic way of life of the Gypsies in the discourse of Roma civic emancipation emerges for the first time in Romania. The first Roma political Assembly in the post-war Romania, held in Rupea on the 16th of January 1919, formulated concrete demands to local authorities and representatives of the new Romanian state, one of which was the assistance in the sedentarisation of the nomads (Matei, 2013, pp. 449–450). Similarly, Naftanailă Lazăr, the President of the first Gypsy civic organization, the Neo-Rustic Brotherhood, established in 1926 in Făgăraş, addressed his fellow members in Transylvania with the following words:

Tent Gypsies should stop wandering and begin a life of settled people. Their children should attend school and the church. Their sons should join the army, where they will receive good and useful teachings. (Lazăr, 1934, p. 1, translation by Raluca Bianca Roman)

This attitude to the issue of Gypsy nomadism is evident also from the documents and the activities of both national organizations founded in 1933, namely the General Association of Gypsies in Romania, headed by Ion Popp-Şerboianu, and the General Union of Roma in Romania, headed by Gheorghe Lăzăreanu-Lăzurică, (Achim, 2004, pp. 153–161). In his Appeal to All Gypsies in Romania from August 27, 1933, Ion Popp-Şerboianu defined as one of the goals of its organization:

The insistence to colonize<sup>1</sup> all nomadic Gypsies by giving them the necessary land in the various parts of the country, and the Association to take full responsibility for their settlement and their proper correction, cutting off the theft and begging. (Năstasă & Varga, 2001, p. 97, translation by Raluca Bianca Roman)

The Statute of the other national organization, the General Union of Roma in Romania, Article 4, point 2, states one of its main objectives:

To stand for the nomads so that they will be settled on the land on the outskirts of towns, or in villages, so that they, once they do not wander anymore, will no longer commit theft, dishonouring the Roma nation, as a pariah of society. (Năstasă & Varga, 2001, p. 120, translation by Raluca Bianca Roman)

In general, Roma activists (who all originated from settled communities) recognized the heterogeneity of their community and made attempts to establish relationships with the heads of the nomadic camps and to respond to their expectations they proposed a differentiated approach towards them. Concerning nomadism, Roma activists were unanimous in their position: Nomads

<sup>1</sup> During the interwar period this term was used in the sense of sedentarisation.

should be sedentarized through special measures of the Romanian state, which must create the appropriate conditions (land allocation, housing, employment) for this. They even proposed special steps for sedentarisation, and the most appropriate locations for the settlement of nomads were discussed: at the periphery or through the formation of suburban communes near cities, fairs, and urban communities, where they would have the opportunity to sell their work weekly (Tache, 1940).

The most rigid and consistent supporters of the idea of sedentarisation of Roma nomads were the leaders of the Oltenia Circle of the General Association of Gypsies, whose vision in this respect is reflected in a number of articles published in the organization's newspaper *Timpul*.

The calls for sedentarisation made by Roma activists did not lead to any reaction from the part of the Romanian state. However, the idea of getting rid of the nomadic way of life among the Gypsies, which was seen as a social problem, paradoxically fitted into the general social context of the Interwar period of time. Under such conditions, several years later, the tragic experiment of solving the issue of nomadism through the deportation of the nomad Gypsies to Transnistria during WWII was realized (Achim, 2004, pp. 167–188). Seen from today's point of view and taking into account the results of this deportation, of special interest are the proposals from Roma activists:

In the labour colonies, where most of them are likely to be sent, it would be desirable for this broader re-education based on broader and more humane understandings. (Tache, 1940, p. 2, translation by Raluca Bianca Roman)

#### 4. Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland

During the interwar period in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, the processes of Roma civic emancipation took different forms.

In Hungary (at that time part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire), at the end of the 19th century, the Association of Hungarian Gypsy Musicians was founded, which published the *Journal of Hungarian Gypsy Musicians* (1908–1910). In 1923, already in independent Hungary, the Hungarian Gypsy Musician's National Association was re-registered and renewed the publishing of the journal. In 1935, the association was transformed into the Hungarian Gypsy Musicians' National Federation and, in 1938, it began publishing the journal *Hungarian Gypsy Music* (Hajnáczky, 2019). The main aim of Hungarian Gypsy musicians activists was the rise of their status and the defence of the professional rights. As such, they were hardly thinking about Gypsies with other occupations and even less about Gypsy nomads.

In Czechoslovakia, the development of the Roma emancipation movement came via the establishment of civic organisations. In 1929, in the city of Košice, Eastern

Slovakia, a civic, non-Roma organization was created, having a significant Gypsy presence among its creators' constituency under the name of the League for Cultural Uplift of Gypsies. It was transformed in 1930 into the Society for the Study and Solving Gypsy Question. This organization supported the establishment of a Gypsy organization, named 'Lavutarisz' Cultural and Social Society of Gypsies in Slovakia (Horváthová, 1964, pp. 168–169; Jurová, 2014, pp. 53–62).

What unites the various forms of Roma civic emancipation processes in both countries is the complete neglect of the problems of the Gypsy nomads, which is reflected in their absence from the documents of the organizations, and their publications. However, an interesting nuance is the performance of a play called 'Gypsy Wedding' with a story from the life of the traveling Gypsies, performed by the Gypsy Theater in Košice, in the framework of the celebrations marking the 500th anniversary of the arrival of the Gypsies in Slovakia ("Oslava 500. výročia príchodu Cigánov na Slovensko," 1938, p. 2). In other words, the nomadic lifestyle of Gypsies was seen as part of the history of the community, which strengthened its identity, but not as a problem of its present, and even less as a prospect for its future development.

The case with the so-called Gypsy Kings in Poland differs more or less from other forms and pursued goals of the Roma civic emancipation movement in the countries of the region during the interwar period. The interesting thing about this case is that its moving force were representatives of a nomadic Gypsy group, the Kelderari, who were new migrants to the Polish lands from Romania in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Already the very first Gypsy who was declared as the Gypsy King, Jan Michalak (Michalescu), appealed to Polish authorities for a legal reform that would allow nomad Gypsies to settle ("Cyganie w Polsce wystawiają własną listę," 1928, p. 2). In fact, the need for the settlement of nomads and the constant emphasizing of the place of Gypsies as full citizens of Poland, who should perform their civic duties, including serving in the army, are found in one form or another in all public messages of all Gypsy Kings and applicants for this position.

The leading vision of the Gypsy Kings for the implementation of Roma civic emancipation was by creating an independent Gypsy state, whose future location was sought on three continents—Asia (in India), Africa (indicated alternatives were Abyssinia, Eritrea, Somalia, Uganda, and Namibia), and South America. This vision implied, as a prerequisite for its realization, the cessation of the nomadic way of life. The Gypsy Kings saw pompous actions, press releases, and interviews as being the essential tools and main ways to attract public interest for their actions, as well as the main ways for them to achieve their aims. It is thus that these types of activities coming from the Polish Gypsy Kings were also widely reflected in the worldwide press.

## 5. The USSR

All example of the attitudes of Roma activists to the Gypsy nomadic way of life in the interwar period presented thus far were only in the field of leadership's visions and almost none in field of practice. But there was a country where the Roma activists got the opportunity to realize their visions in actual practice: this was the early USSR and therefore this case deserves special attention.

The Soviet totalitarian system itself is usually perceived as a pyramid, with party leadership at the top, and all the units located below serving to carry out the decisions taken at the top. In fact, as the case of Roma activists and the policy towards Gypsy nomads will show, things can happen not only following the initiative from top to bottom, but also vice versa.

Surprisingly, it appears that the active side pleading for the sedentarisation of Gypsy nomads in the USSR were initially Gypsy activists, and the Soviet state affirmed and realized these ideas more or less successfully. In January 1924, a meeting of the Initiative Proletarian Group of Gypsies was held, which decided to set up a Society of Gypsies, living on territory of the Moscow governorate. One of the main aims of this Society was "preparing the members of the Society for advanced land processing and agricultural work for the purpose of a transition to a sedentary way of life" (Russia, 1924).

This was followed by a lengthy process lasting more than two years, in which, according to the legal requirements, the Statute of the new organization, now called the Union of Gypsies Living on Territory of RSFSR was coordinated with the Department of Nationalities at the All-Union Central Executive Committee (VTsIK), and in a revised version was submitted for endorsement by the People Commissioner for Home Affairs (NKVD). This proposal for endorsement Statute, Article II (Aims of the Union), § 1 reads:

The Union aims at uniting and organising the Gypsy working masses living on the territory of the RSFSR [Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic], protecting their economic and legal interests, raising the cultural level and organising mutual support and transfer nomads into the productive and agricultural way of life. (Russia, 1925a, authors' translation)

In the Statute of Union, approved by NKVD on July 23, 1925, however, this sentence was removed. The problem with the nomadic way of life is mentioned in Article III, § 6d, which in the new version reads:

The Union...conducts a moral struggle with the public evil among its members, such as: drunkenness, fortune-telling, begging, gambling, nomadism. (Russia, 1925b)

The Gypsy activists themselves, however, had other views on the matter, and as early as in the All-Russian

Union of Gypsies' Plan of Works for 1926, they laid out the following plans:

2/ The Union proposes: a/to allocate in a Southern region a territory for the settlement of Gypsies on which (territory) to unite all kinds of agricultural organizations, as well as the Gypsies who wish to settle independently. (Russia, 1926, authors' translation)

At this stage, the Soviet authorities were reluctant to support such a policy of state-controlled sedentarisation of Gypsy nomads. In 1927, the NKVD received a letter from local authorities of the Tver Governorate which contained complaints of "thefts and scams" carried out by Gypsy nomads and sought to limit the "activity of this parasitic element" (Russia, 1927a), i.e., it asked for administrative measures against the Gypsy nomadic way of life. NKVD's reply of September 20, 1927, was categorical and unambiguous:

The Central Administrative Department of NKVD clarifies that compulsory restriction of the Gypsy nomadism is inadmissible as matter of principle. The Soviet legislature does not know the measures you propose to combat the tribes that lead a nomadic way of life. (Russia, 1927b, authors' translation)

It sounds incredible but, in this case, the NKVD was the guardian of Soviet laws and opposed compulsory sedentarisation. In terms of combating nomadism, for which the Gypsy activists made appeals, in the end they were only given the opportunity to lead a 'moral struggle' against nomadism.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the struggle of Gypsy activists against the nomadic way of life of the Roma was fruitful, reaching support from the highest authorities of the Soviet state. Together with the Department of Nationalities, Gypsy activists prepared two special decrees which were endorsed: On Measures to Facilitate the Transition of Nomadic Gypsies to a Settled Way of Life of October 1, 1926, and On the Allocating Land for Gypsies who are Transitioning to a Sedentary Working Way of Life of June 20, 1928. By the first decree, the Gypsies wishing to settle were entitled to receive agricultural land with priority over the rest of those wishing to do so, as well as the right to enjoy all the privileges enjoyed by the so-called 'pereselentsy' (resettlers). The second decree not only confirmed those privileges but extended them further by assuming the costs of settling from the state budget. In this way, the Gypsies were given the opportunity to enjoy privileges that were inaccessible to the vast majority of the population of the USSR.

In all administrative documents of this period, it is constantly emphasized that the sedentarisation of the Gypsy nomads must be voluntary, without any coercion, and therefore the Gypsy activists have the responsibility of persuasion of the nomads in the advantages

of the sedentary way of life. In 1927, the All-Russian Gypsy Union came out with a special appeal 'To Gypsy Inhabitants of RSFSR.' It is worth to quote the beginning of this appeal:

Ten years ago, thanks to the October Revolution, all national minorities oppressed by the tsarist government received the right to freely build their well-being. The nomadic tribes, with the help of the Soviet authorities, begin to settle on the ground, engaged in agriculture. They have their own stading, their own hamlets, villages, own schools. Every year the number of nomads decreases and soon there will be none at all. (Russia, 1927c, authors' translation)

In this respect, indicative are also the articles in the national press written by leading Roma leaders (cf. Savvov & Lebedev, 1930, p. 3; Taranov, 1927, p. 6). Many similar articles in this regard have also been published in the Romani language journals of *Romani Zoria* and *Nevo Drom*, and also in the two newspapers *About the Bolshevik's Kolkhoz* and *Stalinist*, published by the Gypsy kolkhoz Gypsy Labour in the region of Mineralnye Vody, where in the village of Kangly in 1932 a Gypsy national selsoviet (village council) was created, which existed de jure until 1952 (Russia, 1952). In the 1930s, a mass publishing of books in Romani language began and a significant part of them was devoted to agriculture, in support of the created Gypsy kolkhozes. An example of this is the book by Mikhail Bezlyudskiy (Bezlyudsko, 1933), or a guide for the creation and legal registration of the Gypsy kolkhozes (Bezlyudsko & Germano, 1933).

The Roma activists could rely on scientific justification concerning their attitude towards Gypsy nomadism, using the thesis of the famous Russian ethnographer Lev Sternberg:

Gypsies, to a large extent, and perhaps completely, are a victim of the historical injustice of the surrounding peoples. (Sternberg, 1903, pp. 307–308, authors' translation)

This thesis is repeated and enlarged in the text 'About the work among Gypsies' prepared for the official use of Soviet institutions by Ivan Lebedev (1926), known later as Ivan Rom-Lebedev, a secretary of the All-Russian Union of Gypsies, in 1926. There, he explains Gypsy nomadism, with an emphasis on the centuries-old persecution to which they had been subjected over the centuries, and the argument that only the October Revolution opened before them the way to new life (Lebedev, 1926). Also, on this basis, the Roma activists have, for the first time, formulated the concept of anti-Gypsyism (Lebedev & German, 1929, p. 4; Taranov, 1931; cf. also Holler, 2014, pp. 84–88), which is so popular nowadays.

In this way, the overall logic of Roma visionaries' attitude towards Gypsy nomadism was shaped: Once the nomadic lifestyle has arisen as a result of the injustice

of the surrounding peoples and their respective institutions, its discontinuation must accordingly be conducted by the Soviet institution, who took over the historical responsibility to care for the creation of a rightful society. The mechanisms by which Gypsy activists in the 1930s strived to influence the main directions within the Soviet policy included the usage of addressing the authorities in frames of the popular genre of the time, the 'Letter to the Leader.' This form of address to the authorities was imposed in Soviet society as soon as the pyramid of the Communist rule was finally established, and it became clear to all who the real 'Supreme Leader' of the Soviet state was (at that time, Stalin, the Secretary-General).

Unlike many other letters of this genre, the letters written by Gypsy activists concern not specific problems, but rather pose general questions of principle about the overall dimensions of Soviet politics towards the Gypsies, its main aims and tasks, and the forms and mechanisms of its implementation in specific basic fields (in our case, the issue of sedentarisation). Thus, these letters once again confirm that Gypsy activism appears (or at least tried to be) an active factor in the formation and implementation of Gypsy policy in the USSR.

Chronologically, the first letter of this type is from Ilya Gerasimov, from the region of Smolensk, at that time (the letter is dated November 9, 1934) a cadet in Higher Courses of Soviet Construction at the VTsIK, and was addressed to the Chairman of the VTsIK of USSR, Mikhail Kalinin. The main message of the letter is as follows:

I ask you to bring up the matter of the sedentarisation of the nomadic Gypsies, having in mind dedicating a special Gypsy territory in the form of a [national] rayon. (Gerasimov, 1934, authors' translation)

The next letter is from the Summer of 1935, from Trofim Gerasimov, an engineer at the Train carriage factory in the town of Zaporizhzhia-Kamenskoe in the Ukrainian SSR. The letter is addressed to "the Dear Leader of the Party and Workers' Class—Comrade Joseph Vissarionovich STALIN" (Gerasimov, 1935) and it argues for the need for rapid sedentarisation of Gypsy nomads and specifies how this can be done:

The settlement of the toiling Gypsies is truly significant. The available kolkhozes would go to their designated rayon with great willingness and this will allow the Gypsy camps to be liquidated....[The] important issue, is the initial detachment of a Gypsy rayon, which would have to grow and turn into an autonomous Gypsy republic....In the rayon where the Gypsies would be settled, people's education could be conducted in all social dimensions....With the organization of the rayon which will, with enormous speed, turn into an autonomous republic, this army of toiling Gypsies will become a direct conduit for the construction of Socialism—our direct and main task. (Gerasimov, 1935, authors' translation)

In 1935, Ilya Gerasimov returned to Western Oblast (with the center in Smolensk) after completing his training at the School for Soviet Personnel Leaders and was appointed Instructor of the Western Oblast Executive Committee. In early 1936, he organized a major public event for Gypsy activists, namely the First Union consultative meeting on the issue of cultural and economic service to the working Gypsies from the entire USSR. There, on behalf of the delegates of Western Oblast, a letter was adopted unanimously and sent “to the Great Teacher, the Genius Leader of the Working People from all over the World, the Great Leader of our Communist Party VKP(b), Comrade Stalin!” (Russia, 1936a). This letter raised the question of the need for the rapid transition of the nomadic population to a sedentary lifestyle:

We are asking on behalf of the Gypsies to allocate a territory, at least in the form of a rayon, for the compact settlement of the toiling Gypsies. (Russia, 1936a, authors’ translation)

In the Summer of 1936, the so-called nationwide discussion of the draft USSR Constitution (adopted on December 5, 1936) was held. Within this discussion, the newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, in the heading ‘The Workers Propose,’ published opinions of three workers from Moscow, who offered:

To create a Gypsy Autonomous Oblast within the RSFSR or the Ukrainian SSR, uniting presently scattered Gypsy kolkhozes; thanks to the creation of the Gypsies Autonomous Oblast, we will be even more successful in the transition of Gypsies to a settled status and their cultural revival. (Maslennikov, Smirnov, & Pletnev, 1936, p. 2, authors’ translation)

Immediately afterward, a message was published on behalf of the “Moscow Gypsy Activists Group at the Central Gypsy Club and the plenipotentiaries of the once again organized Gypsy kolkhoz in Kharkiv,” supporting this proposal with the argument that “the establishment of the Gypsy Autonomous Oblast will contribute to the rapid settlement of toiling Gypsies on the allocated territory” (“Rabochie predlagayut,” 1936, p. 2), i.e., the Gypsy activists again put to the fore the need for the urgent sedentarisation of the Gypsy nomads.

A few months later, in the public debate about the new Constitution, Ilya Gerasimov reported that:

Among the nomadic population a great craving for a settled life can now be seen; when discussing the draft of Stalin’s Constitution in the Gypsy kolkhozes and among the nomadic population there were many motions asking the government to allocate one area in the Union for the settlement of the Gypsies. (Gerasimov, 1936a, p. 3, authors’ translation)

Along with this, he sent a letter to the Constitutional Commission, under the leadership of Joseph Stalin, which reads:

The discussion of the Stalin’s Constitution project of the USSR in the Gypsy kolkhozes and among the nomadic population provoked great activity....The nomadic population asks the Constitution’s Commission, under the leadership of J. V. STALIN, and the Government to allocate a rayon in the [Soviet] Union for the compact settlement of the Gypsies....There is now a particularly great attraction to sedentarisation....I consider it necessary to dedicate a rayon in the Soviet Union for the purpose of setting up Gypsy kolkhozes, village councils, to provide them with help in getting employment. (Gerasimov, 1936b, authors’ translation)

The proposals made by the Gypsy activists for the creation of a Gypsy territorial-administrative unit, which they associated with the sedentarisation of Gypsy nomads, received support from the Soviet authorities. In 1935, a circular request was sent by Department of Nationalities of VTsIK to the subjects of the RSFSR with the question whether they are able to provide vacant land for the compact settlement of Gypsy nomads, for the purpose of sedentarisation (Russia, 1935). The answers received were diverse. Some of the local authorities (e.g., North Caucasus kray, Azov-Black Sea kray, Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic [ASSR]) were adamant that they had no vacant land. Gorky kray, on the contrary, offered land in the Mari ASSR (which belonged to it at that time), or in Omsk region (where the land offered was in the Ostyako-Vogul district, today the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug). The West Siberian Territory bound the provision of vacant land in the Chisto-Ozersky rayon (today in the Altai Kray) with the need to receive additional budgetary investments (Russia, 1935). Most of the Gypsy activists continued to push for a territory in southern Russia, and for his part, Ilya Gerasimov, using his administrative position, proposed the Western Oblast, justifying it with the presence in the area of an already prepared primary structure—Gypsy kolkhozes, Gypsy schools and, most importantly, with the availability of prepared cadres, Communists and Komsomol members with respective education, who “can fully provide management of the allotted territory” (Russia, 1936b).

Finally, after long debates at various levels within Soviet institutions (with the active involvement of Gypsy activists), on April 7, 1936 the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR adopted a decree on Measures on the Employment of Nomads and the Improvement of Economic and Cultural Services for Toiler Gypsies (Council of Nationalities at Central Executive Committee of the USSR, 1936). However, for various reasons (the overall changes in USSR national policy, the preparation for WWII, disagreements between

institutions, etc.), the successful implementation of the plans to create a Gypsy national territorial administrative unit was hindered (for more details see Marushiakova & Popov, in press; O’Keeffe, 2013, pp. 177–186).

The last letter to Stalin during the interwar period was from Nikolay Pankov written in 1938, and is different from the rest (Pankov, 1938). In it, the leading theme was not the Gypsy nomadism; it offers a relatively much more comprehensive and detailed program for the need to work on a solution to the problems faced by the Gypsies in the USSR. The emphasis is placed on the development of the Romani language, education, and culture, and even on the question of the need for political representation of the Gypsies in the highest state bodies. Moreover, the letter de facto protests against the already started policy of closing down Gypsy schools and of suspending Romani language publications, which is distinctive compared to the other letters to Stalin. This letter should be viewed in the context of an already launched radical change within the nationalities policy of the USSR, which put an end to the affirmative action policy.

In general, the leading line in nationalities politics in the early USSR was its ideology of affirmative action. There were no set criteria as to which nationalities of what exactly national structures were entitled. Each case was decided individually, but in general, the leading line in nationalities politics in the early USSR was its ideology of affirmative action with respect to individual nationalities, including Gypsies, who in no way were detached from other nationalities (Martin, 2001). Therefore, changes in the Soviet policy towards the Gypsies after 1938 should not be interpreted as some special anti-Gypsy policy of the Soviet state, but as part (and certainly not the most important) of the overall change in the paradigm of Soviet nationalities politics.

It is interesting to note that, in fact, we only have the manuscript of Nikolay Pankov’s letter, in which it is noted that an edited version of it had been sent to Stalin. However, unlike the thousands of others that have been scattered across various Soviet institutions, this letter is not stored in the state archives. According to the recollections of family members of Nikolay Pankov, months after the letter was sent, he lived in anxious expectation to be arrested, but nothing happened. It was only three years later that he was visited by NKVD officials, who informed him that Comrade Stalin had become acquainted with his letter. However, no further reaction from the authorities followed (Kalinin, 2005, pp. 56–57). It should be noted that none of the Gypsies’ letters, although addressed personally to Stalin, came with a resolution written by him, as it was usual in other such cases. Thus, we have reason to believe that these letters did not reach Stalin at all but were forwarded by his secretariat directly to the appropriate institutions (about official proceedings with the thousands of letters to Stalin see Khlevniuk, 2015). The only exception to this was Nikolay Pankov’s letter.

After the end of WWII, a group of Roma activists from Moscow, led by Ivan Rom-Lebedev, sent a letter to Stalin,

in which they expressed their hopes for the return of the active state policy towards the Gypsies, including in the field of the nomads’ sedentarisation (Rom-Lebedev et al., 1946). The letter remained unanswered, and the Soviet institutions’ neglect of the problems of the Gypsy nomads continued. This only changed in the early 1950s. The Soviet archives preserve huge volume with numerous letters to the authorities at various levels, including the Council of Ministers, written during the period 1952–1953, in which nomadic Gypsies from different regions ask for help with their sedentarisation, permanent residence, employment, and housing (Russia, 1953). The Roma activists were not left out of this process either.

On June 12, 1953, Nikolay Pankov sent a letter to Pyotr Pospelov who was the secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, in which he pointed the Gypsy nomadic way of life as a serious problem and asked for a resumption of the state policy towards them (Druts & Gessler, 1990, pp. 304–305). In 1955, a new letter from Andrei Taranov (the former chairman of the All-Russian Union of Gypsies) and Nikolay Pankov was sent to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of USSR, to the USSR Council of Ministers, and the *Pravda* newspaper (Ivashchenko, 1996, p. 43). Desperate for the lack of answer, on March 14, 1956, Nikolay Pankov wrote a letter to the new Soviet Party and State Chief, Nikita Khrushchev, in which he asked:

The positive experience of the recent past, on the one hand, and the present situation of the Gypsies in their capacity as an unorganized roaming tribe, prompt me to turn to you, Nikita Sergeevich, with this letter, the purpose of which is—the request to discuss the situation of the Gypsies of the USSR and to find an opportunity to resume work among the Gypsies on the transition to a settled way of life, employment and culture. (Druts & Gessler, 1990, p. 305, authors’ translation)

Unlike previous letters, it seems as though this letter had a substantial result, and it was very quick. On October 5, 1956, the decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR on the Admission to Labor of the Gypsy Vagrants was issued. It cannot be said that the issuing of this decree is a direct result of Pankov’s letter and it is quite possible that Soviet authorities independently have reached this solution. But at first glance it seems that Roma activists, after more than three decades, have finally been able to convince the Soviet authorities of the need to eradicate the Gypsies’ nomadic way of life. However, the ban on the Gypsy nomadism does not entail any other changes in the Gypsy policy of the Soviet state; in fact, such a policy was de facto absent, and the policy of affirmative action against the Gypsies was finally abandoned. Thus, with one blow, the Soviet state deprived the Gypsy elite of its main argument—the need to fight the nomadic way of life—which they had constantly used in trying to convince the authorities of the need for pro-Gypsy politics to be more active from the



early days of the USSR until the Decree was issued. This was actually the end of the attempts of the Roma elite formed in the 1920s and 1930s in the USSR to become an active subject in the policy of the Soviet state regarding Gypsies, through active dialogue with the state institutions. As shown, these attempts ultimately proved to be unsuccessful, because the two sides of this dialogue were from the very beginning in unequal positions, with one of them (Soviet authorities) being the leading and determining force, and the other (the Roma elite) dependent.

## 6. Conclusion

As could be seen from the sources, the attitudes towards the nomadism of the Roma civic elite in CSEEE during the interwar period took different forms, oscillating between two poles. On the one pole, this was the de facto total disregard of the Roma nomads (in most countries in the region), and on the other, the repeated calls for the state to end their nomadic lifestyle and create conditions for sedentarisation. The latter was especially clear in Romania and the USSR where, in the interwar period, a policy of land re-distribution and programs for land allocation were conducted. What unites these options is the presumption that the necessary condition for the realisation of Roma civic emancipation was the cessation of a nomadic lifestyle. This leading vision of the new Roma civic elite has its logical explanation.

The Roma civic movement was born and developed amongst permanently settled Roma. Even in countries in which the majority of Roma were nomads (such as Poland and USSR), their elite was formed of representatives who had already adopted a sedentary way of life. This is perfectly understandable—it is precisely the settled Roma who were able to achieve a higher degree of social integration than those who lead a nomadic way of life, and that is why it was precisely in their midst that ideas for a civic emancipation were born. It was under this background that the nomadic way of life Roma was perceived as an obstacle. The scholars of the time left these ideas mostly unaccounted for. If they were regarded at all they were perceived as curious but short-lived deviations which would not impact future developments. The orientalist, colonial attitudes towards Roma found their expression in hopes such as these:

But somehow our faith in the impenetrable destiny of our friends 'out of Egypt' reassures us that the old Romany characteristics will triumph over all such modern veneers in the end, and that things will never become quite so bad as that. (Haley, 1934, p. 186)

Relapses from such exoticization of the Roma, seen as eternal nomads, are not uncommon even nowadays, as the concept of nomadism serves to legitimize discrimination and segregation of Roma in contemporary Europe (cf. Sigona, 2005, pp. 741–756). The major issues

in the history of Roma, which create obstacles for its proper comprehension, have thus far been constituted by two predetermined discourses according to which Roma history has been (and continues to be) articulated by researchers: namely, by approaching the Roma as a problem and/or as a victim. In the past, beginning with the first academic interest in the so-called Gypsies (Grellmann, 1783), they have been researched mainly from the point of view of solving the problems they were seen to pose to the modern state. In the aftermath of WWII, the paradigm gradually shifted, and has often set the focus primarily on Roma's grim historical experience, as well as on the various repressive state policies that discriminated and fostered them. However, both discourses, though radically opposite, are united in their attitude to the Roma whose point of view is de facto absent, which places them into a marginal position of an a-historic population which is fully dependant from the majority societies, and according to which social inclusion looks like "a task for Sisyphus" (Rostas, 2019). The inclusion of 'Roma Voices' (Marushiakova & Popov, in press) from history as a main basis for future research may help in creating a Roma historical narrative which will also enable Roma to reclaim ownership of their history.

## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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