



ROMA PROGRAM OF THE HUNGARIAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION

PROJECT DESCRIPTION 2012



SUMMARY

In 2008 and 2009 six Roma including a four year old child and women were killed and five Roma individuals were injured due to their ethnic origin in a planned serial of homicides. The police addressed the events as a series of ethnic motivated murders only after severe and assiduous pressure from civil organisations.

This occurred in a country where the majority of the population have serious racist prejudices and where the extreme right wing party 'Jobbik' is among the most popular parliamentary parties.

At the same time, the greatest part of Roma live in deep poverty as underprivileged citizens and are often even discriminated against by public authorities (police, municipalities, schools).

The HCLU, Hungary's leading law reform and human rights watchdog NGO has decided to step up against structural discrimination of the most populous Hungarian minority and launched its Roma Program. The project has a complex, combined, bottom up approach that reaches far beyond legal assistance and aims to empower Roma people and enable them to organise their own communities and select their own leaders.

In addition, the project strives to shape public opinion in order to diminish the degree of discrimination.

The program is a combination of innovative elements: fieldwork paired with quick and effective media outreach and the use of cost-effective communication coupled with legal aid and strategic litigation. At numerous legal support stations located in impoverished small villages with a high proportion of Roma inhabitants, counseling is offered via Skype by attorneys from Budapest, while the stations themselves are maintained by local Roma activists. These local leaders also participate in regular trainings on legal issues facilitated by the HCLU. This platform, the regular courses and community-organising activities enable the activists to strengthen their positions as leaders

in their own communities, as well as in the eyes of the authorities and non-Roma, which enhances cooperation and helps the Roma community to further organise themselves. Strategic litigation is offered in severe cases which harbor the possibility of changing legislation, law-enforcement or the public attitude. As part of its legal advocacy activity, the HCLU also constantly monitors legislation and law enforcement measures. Regular media presence is maintained by the great number of the HCLU's advocacy films, video messages, blogposts on our blog (in Hungarian) and on our website (in English). Hungarian and international journalists of the most popular media platforms often ask our fieldworkers to accompany them to local Roma communities.

As a consequence of the systematic intimidation of Roma by extremists in the village of Gyöngyöspata, the program extended its activities to ensuring a constant and active presence in this crisis situation as well.

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ABOUT THE HCLU

The Hungarian Civil Liberties Union (HCLU) is a non-profit human rights watchdog NGO established in Budapest, Hungary in 1994. The HCLU operates independently of political parties, the state or any of its institutions. Its aim is to promote the case of fundamental rights and principles laid down by the Constitution of the Republic of Hungary and by international conventions. Generally, it has the goal of building and strengthening civil society and rule of law in Hungary and the CEE region. Since the HCLU is an independent non-profit organization, financial resources are largely provided by foundations and more and more often by individuals.



HCLU ROMA PROGRAM STAFF

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Judit Horváth – program coordinator
Péter Juhász – fieldworker, advocacy expert
László Siroki – fieldworker
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Ádám Surányi – video editor
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Andrea Polgár - head of administration, HCLU
Nóra Perlik - accountant
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András Cserny - coordinator of the 'Legal empowerment through freedom of information and participatory rights' project

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Gábor Győző - pro bono lawyer

Dominika Rácz - pro bono lawyer

Tamás Gerő - pro bono lawyer

Noémi Hatala - volunteer editor, reporter

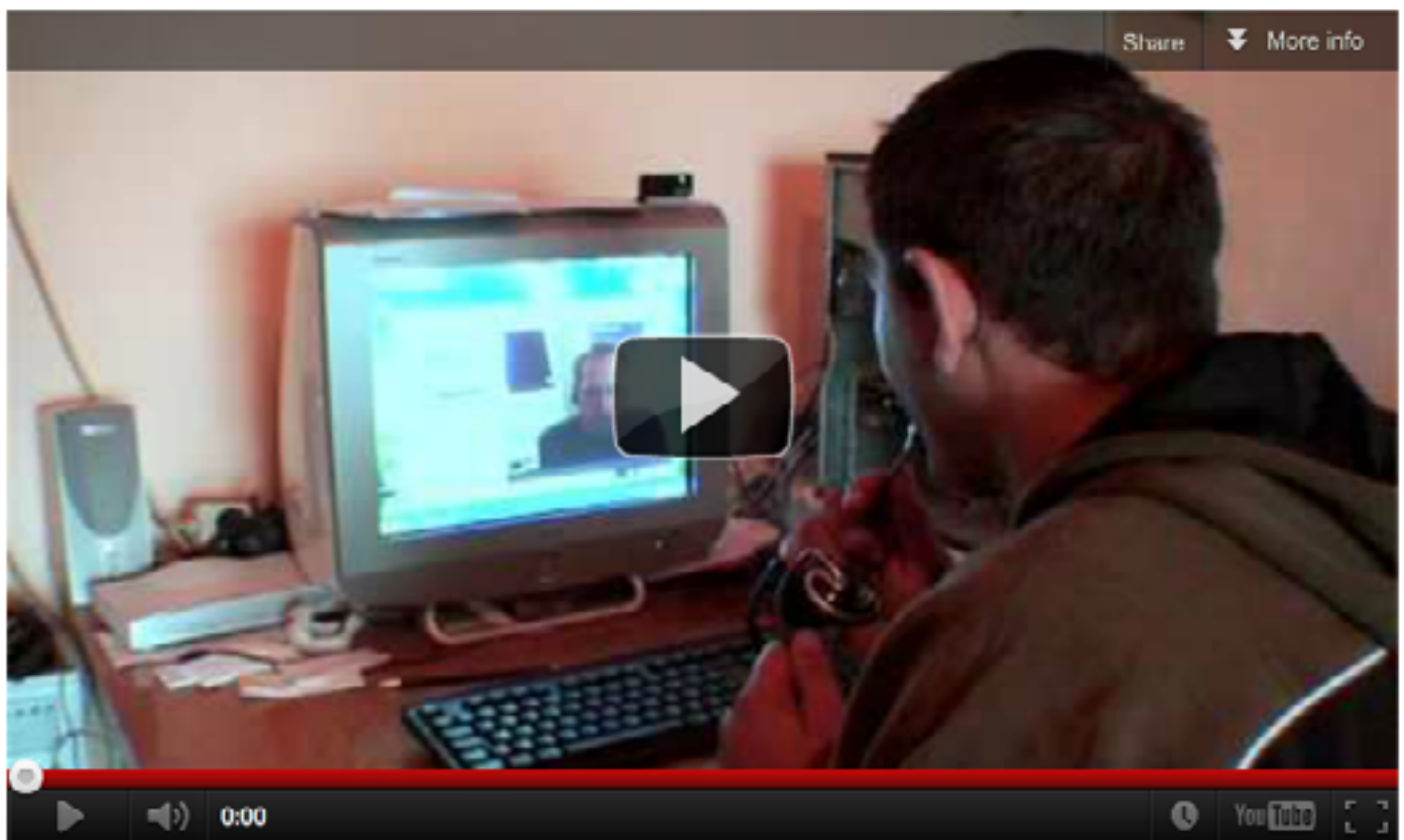
István Gábor Takács - video advocacy program director, HCLU

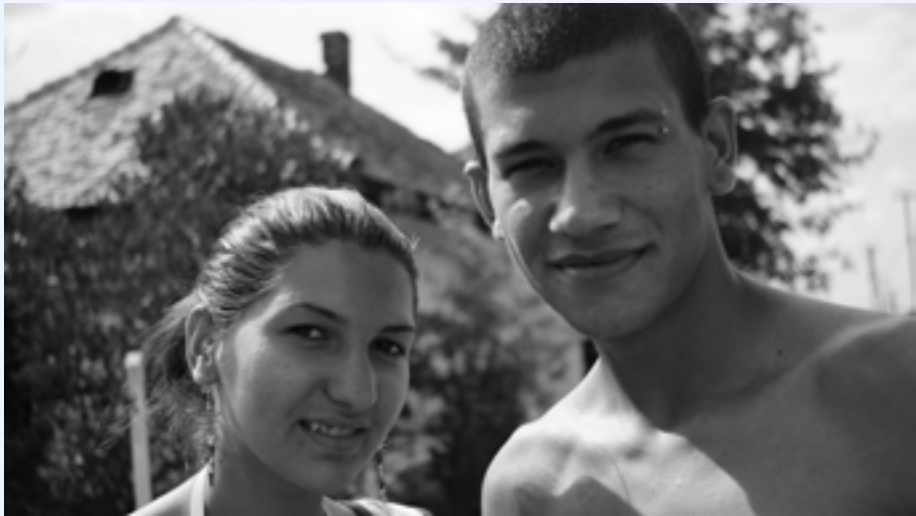
Krisztina Túry - fundraiser

GOALS

We believe that in order to improve the situation of Roma people in Hungary, it is essential that they organize their own communities and select their own leaders who might become strong advocates for their communities. The ineffective self-organization of Roma minorities stems mainly from suppression by local actors – such as the police and the local governments – and is exacerbated by their general lack of knowledge in social and legal fields, both of which are vital. Given local suppression, i.e. constant pressure and harassment from the authorities, in most cases their energy is wasted on just trying to stay afloat. Thus, our goal is to enable – through the interlinked components of our Program - Roma people and communities to exercise their basic rights and by acquiring necessary advocacy skills to take matters into their own hands. Through the empowerment of Roma people by the means of constant fieldwork, community organizing, legal counseling, strategic litigation, legal advocacy and media activities, we aim to diminish the degree of discrimination against the Roma and to shape public opinion.

A short-film (11 minutes) about the Program is available on our English website. Click on the image to watch the video:





INNOVATIONS

The Program was launched in the beginning of April 2010. It is based on fieldwork, which covers the North-eastern part of Hungary, mainly Borsod County, which is the most densely populated area by Roma and where far-right extremism is widely present. The most significant innovations of the Program are: regular personal presence generating trust in communities, combination of fieldwork with active and effective media broadcasts and use of cost-effective communication in legal aid activities and strategic litigation where needed. 11 colleagues, five pro bono attorneys and several volunteers work on the program.



FIELDWORK

Based on regular weekly visits, fieldwork is an innovation in itself compared to previous practice in the field of Roma legal defence. Instead of expecting victims, cases and issues to find us, we discover them through permanent presence in the community. This way we blend community-organizing tools with classic legal defence methods.



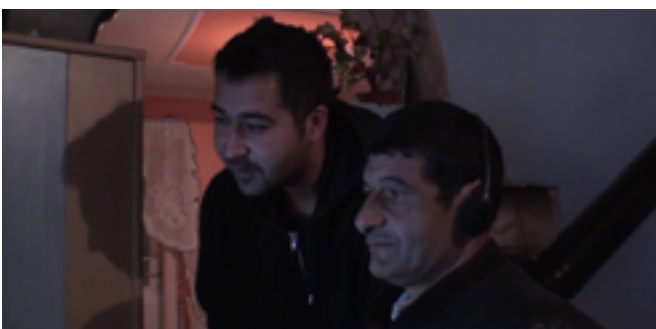
WORKING WITH GATEKEEPERS

Local activists (gatekeepers) are identified directly through our fieldwork activities and are provided with instruments enabling them to realise their legal interests and to organise themselves.



COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

Community-organizing activities further promote dialogue between local communities and activists, and help establish local organizations, which in turn strengthen cooperation.



LEGAL AID ON SKYPE

During our legal aid activities, we capitalize on possibilities provided by the internet: legal aid is offered via Skype, while the attorneys are located in Budapest. This way we can provide independent expertise since our attorneys are not biased by judges or authorities of the victim's region.



BOTTOM UP

Instead of a top-down approach, we react to the actual issues and situations present in the lives of Roma living in deep poverty. In order to maintain a bottom-up approach we do not formulate topics and issues in advance. Strategic litigation is an exception, as legal representation is provided only in cases, which fit our criteria.



COMBINED APPROACH

A complex, combined approach is another essential part of our method. Our activities reach beyond legal assistance, including activities in the cultural and social fields as well. Being able to help everyone who turns to us in some way is the key to the success of our project. In case the HCLU is unable to assist them, clients are directed to a competent person, organization or media representative. Cases related to activities involving other organizations or state institutions are directed there.



VIDEO ADVOCACY

The Program's cameraman regularly accompanies fieldworkers. Customized advocacy films depict certain issues, which are not only uploaded to the HCLU's website and blog, but regularly appear on Index.hu, Hungary's leading online news portal, to make the most of publicity. By relaying short video messages, we provide the opportunity for those living in deep poverty to make their voices heard, while we also hope to reshape public attitudes.





TASZPONT opens at Sajóvárkony.



ACTIVITIES

SKYPE LEGAL AID SERVICE AND LEGAL COUNSELING AT TASZPONTS

Since the beginning of the Program, we have already established TASZPONTs (legal support stations) at 25 locations of 4 counties of Northern Hungary located in family residences or on the premises of the local minority self-governments.

These stations are equipped with computers, scanners, web cameras and printers. The legal aid service via Skype allows clients, who otherwise would not be able to afford a lawyer, to seek legal help.

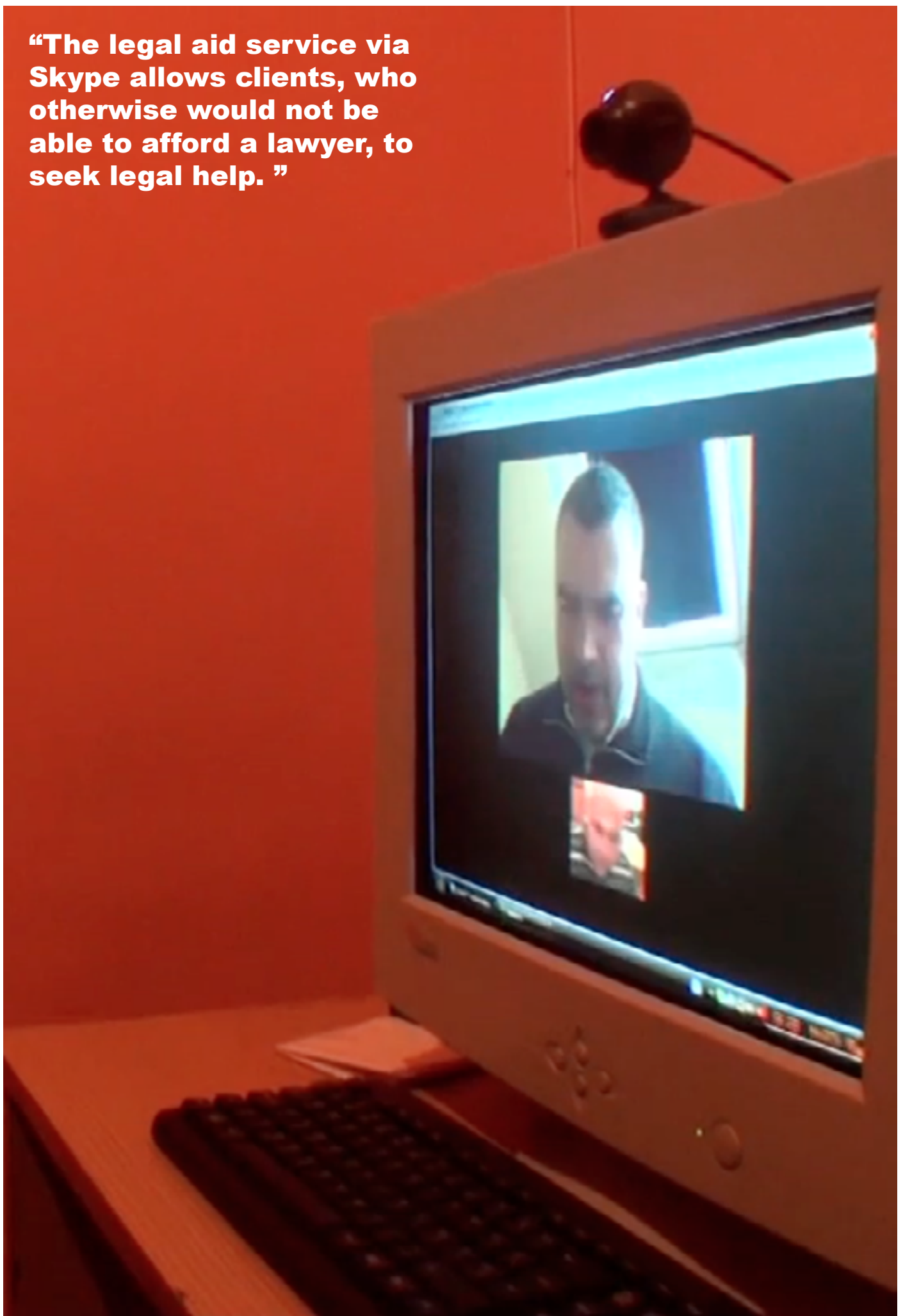
The client is able to scan and send his documents to the lawyer located in Budapest, who in turn is able to provide sample letters and petitions, complaints, requests, appeals, etc. The lawyers provide legal counseling work pro bono. [Follow this link to see where TASZPONTs are located.](#)

Legal counseling at TASZPONTs is a basic function. Since clients have to make further use of the advice given to them, they become more independent and active, and are urged to advocate for themselves.





“The legal aid service via Skype allows clients, who otherwise would not be able to afford a lawyer, to seek legal help. ”



ACTIVITIES

FIELDWORK, COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

Direct contact is made with Roma communities and activists are chosen.

By setting up TASZPONTs, communities are provided with a platform for debating their problems and issues, for speaking with lawyers and seeking legal counseling.

Roma communities and activists are introduced to each other, assistance is provided in launching new joint projects, in establishing new ones, and strengthening already existing organizations.

The TASZPONT operators regularly meet with each other and with our advocacy experts at meetings organized every second week.

Twice a year we organize TASZPONT meetings for all activists and all HCLU Roma Program staff.

Journalists, professionals and those interested are taken to the field where they are introduced to activists, issues, cases and circumstances.

The communication network is built matrix-like. It is a goal to urge our local activists and active community members to communicate with each other without using the HCLU as an intermediary.

The use of web 2.0 sites - web applications facilitating interactive information sharing - is promoted in Roma communities.

Trainings are organized in order to pass on necessary knowledge for legal advocacy activities.

Informative materials are published on the internet and are widely distributed (leaflet on victims' rights, leaflet on patients' rights) and further informational materials are planned.

Conflict management, mediating between locals/communities and authorities/municipalities are also part of our fieldwork activities.

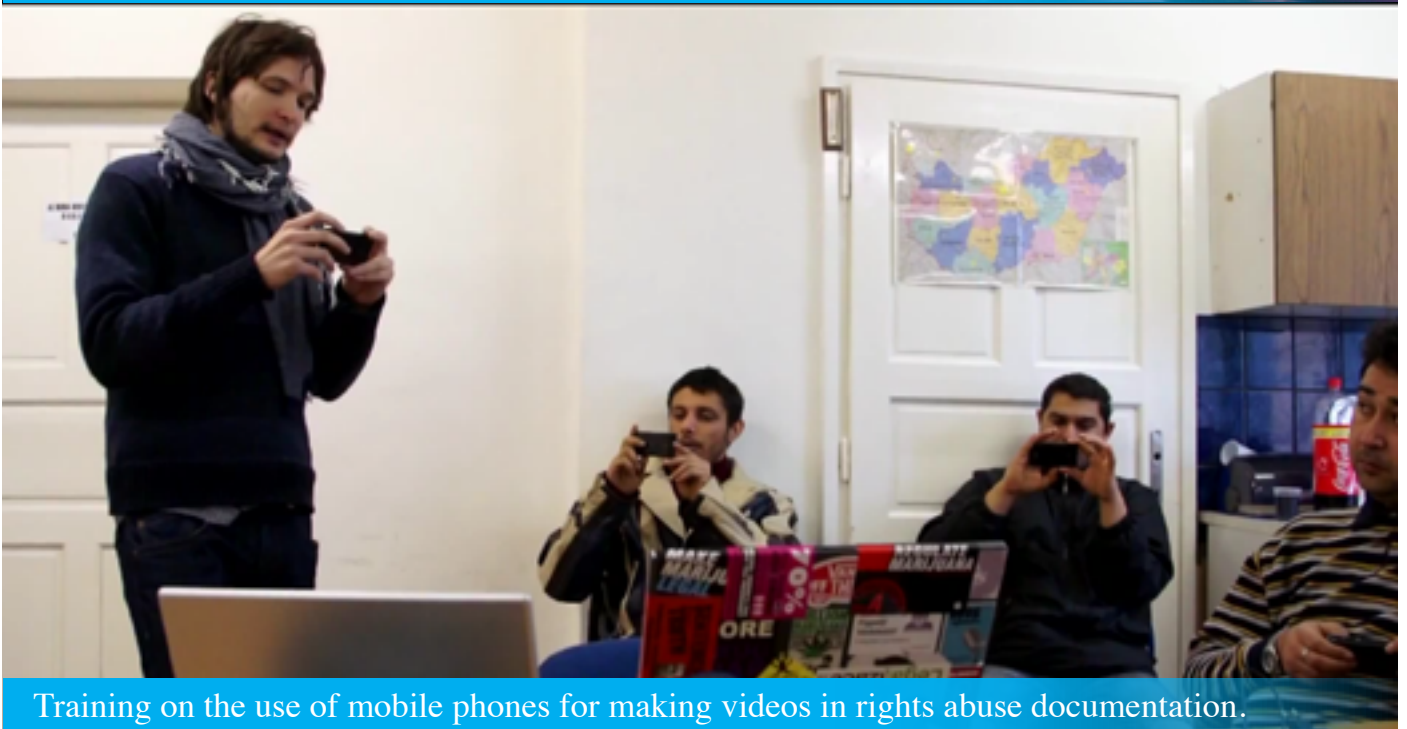
Assistance is provided in organizing cultural events, and helping with social matters is also on the agenda.



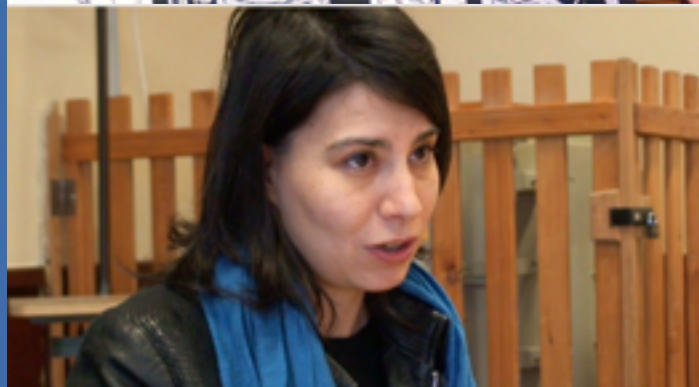




“Let’s read together” cultural event with Soma, a Hungarian celebrity.



Training on the use of mobile phones for making videos in rights abuse documentation.



Legal training.

ACTIVITIES

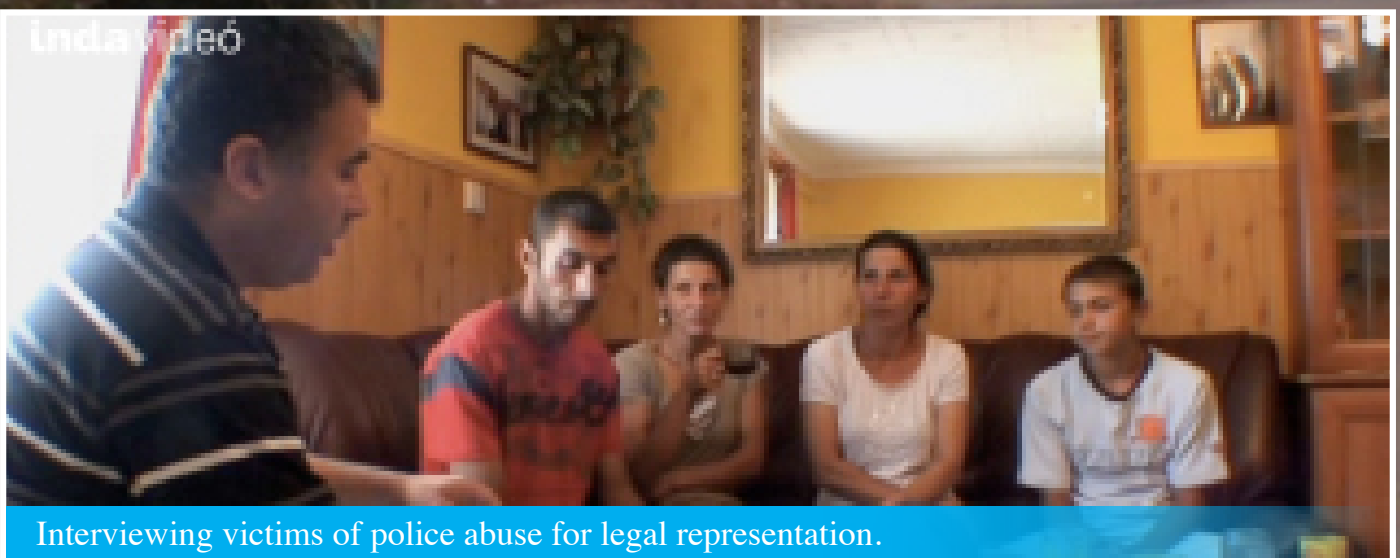
STRATEGIC LITIGATION

Legal representation is provided in exceptional cases only, when a case is strategically important and fits the following strict criteria system:

- Discrimination by authorities, municipalities or public service providers or in cases where selective application of law by those is suspected, and
- which are able to influence legislation, and
- represent serious issues – either due to complicated legal circumstances or in cases where a larger group needs representation or in cases where the victim is particularly endangered, and
- establish precedent, and
- which are appropriate to be communicated in the media.

TYPICAL CASES ARE:

- conflicts/fights between the extremists and the Roma, where the criminal proceedings are initiated only against the Roma;
- maltreatment by police officers, where the police file a parallel report against the aggrieved party imputing him with committing an assault against public officials; ([This video for example shows a 12 year old child who was beaten by policemen.](#))
- violence against a member of the community (hate crime); (Our film “[My house will be painted with your blood](#)” shows how Roma people in Gyöngyöspata were threatened by far-right extremists)
- disproportionately high fines being imposed for committing minor offences related inter alia to deficiencies of bicycles; ([Watch this video](#) where a Roma man spends a month in jail for not having a proper light on his bicycle)
- child abuse and humiliation in nurseries and primary schools. ([This short video](#) shows the case when a teacher could not handle a little boy so she tied him down.)



Interviewing victims of police abuse for legal representation.



ACTIVITIES

LEGAL ADVOCACY

Similarly to other HCLU programs, within the framework of the Roma Program we also monitor legislation, criticize discriminative and illegal law enforcement measures, draft petitions to the Ombudsman, to the Constitutional Court, etc. In pursuance of these activities, we often cooperate with other Hungarian and international legal defense organizations (e.g. European Roma Rights Center, Legal Defense Bureau for National and Ethnic Minorities, Hungarian Helsinki Committee) and also with intergovernmental organizations.

The following issues are in the focus of our legal advocacy activities:

- hate crimes and hate incidents (activities of extreme right-wing organizations); ([Listen to this family whose windows were thrown in with stones.](#))
- discriminative fining practice of the police; ([The Roma husband is fined, his white wife is not. Watch this everyday example.](#))
- other discriminative practices of different authorities, primarily the local governments. (An example can be seen here, [when the garbage truck does not collect on the gypsy row.](#))









A boy in his former home. The family was evicted because they could not pay the municipality rent. The houses are ruined to avoid them from moving back.

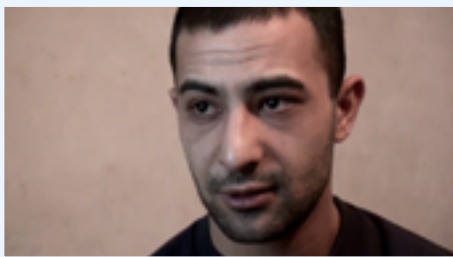
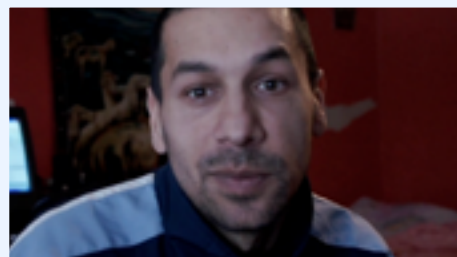
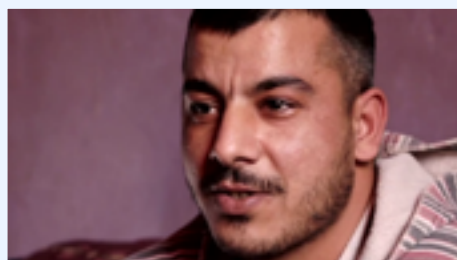
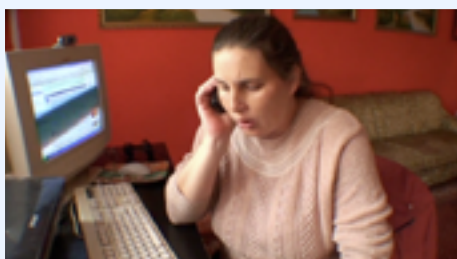
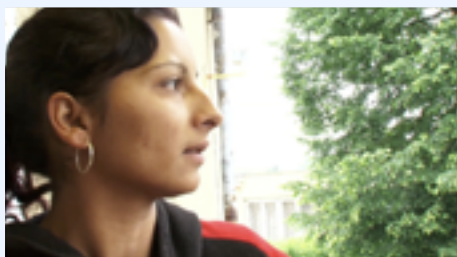


ACTIVITIES

VIDEO ADVOCACY

We put great emphasis on informing the public about our activities and the various cases, situations and difficulties we meet during our work. Hence our camera-man pays regular visits to the field with the fieldworkers. We record testimonies of people, who talk about police abuse, how they are fined day by day for having a flat tire on the bicycle or for pushing the baby carriage on the street instead of the unusable pedestrian pavement, or how children are being beaten by policemen in the school or at the police station. In 2010, we produced a 45 minute long documentary called “Without Rights,” on the experiences of our Program and on the situation of Roma people in Hungary (It got around 70 thousand views). We also filmed during the events of Gyöngyöspata in 2011. Besides the longer thematic advocacy videos, we transfer short video-messages to the public within the series “Make your voice visible!”. The aim of this series is to enable Roma people to broadcast their opinions, which due to their circumstances, are entirely shut off from the public and would remain unnoticed otherwise. Additionally, we make short-films and - on specific topics - educational-films about our most significant cases and the most important events. The video-messages and the films, together with the accompanying articles are made public through our blog, while their English version is published on the HCLU’s English homepage.





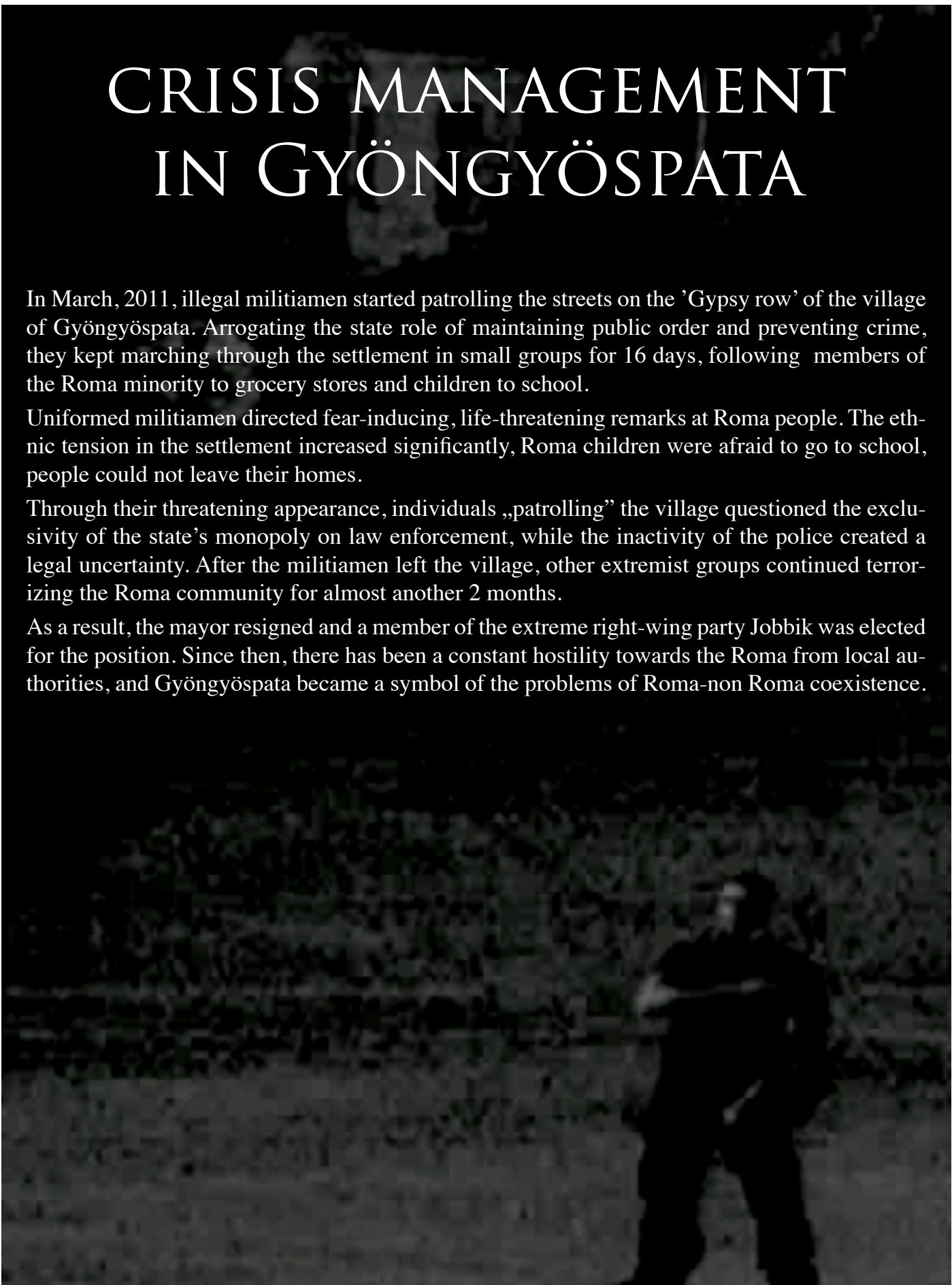
CRISIS MANAGEMENT IN GYÖNGYÖSPATA

In March, 2011, illegal militiamen started patrolling the streets on the 'Gypsy row' of the village of Gyöngyöspata. Arrogating the state role of maintaining public order and preventing crime, they kept marching through the settlement in small groups for 16 days, following members of the Roma minority to grocery stores and children to school.

Uniformed militiamen directed fear-inducing, life-threatening remarks at Roma people. The ethnic tension in the settlement increased significantly, Roma children were afraid to go to school, people could not leave their homes.

Through their threatening appearance, individuals „patrolling” the village questioned the exclusivity of the state's monopoly on law enforcement, while the inactivity of the police created a legal uncertainty. After the militiamen left the village, other extremist groups continued terrorizing the Roma community for almost another 2 months.

As a result, the mayor resigned and a member of the extreme right-wing party Jobbik was elected for the position. Since then, there has been a constant hostility towards the Roma from local authorities, and Gyöngyöspata became a symbol of the problems of Roma-non Roma coexistence.



CCTV recording of a drunk man provoking Roma citizens in Gyöngyöspata on 26.04.2011. After waving “Heil Hitler” style, he shouted: “Fuck me, I am pissing in the shape of a swastica”





“Through their threatening appearance, individuals „patrol-ling” the village questioned the exclusivity of the state’s monopoly on law enforcement, while the inactivity of the police created a legal uncertainty.”



Due to the systematic intimidation of the Roma by extremists for several weeks in Gyöngyöspata, we were “forced” to extend our activities by the means of ensuring constant and active presence in this crisis situation.

Thanks to our strong connections with the Roma community, our fieldworkers were informed about the situation and also about the subsequent events even before the media. Besides mediation, we take certain cases on for legal representation, we make videos, write blogposts and press releases.

The events in Gyöngyöspata also became part of our legal advocacy activities. We published two legal standpoints as well as two open letters and negotiated with state representatives on how to handle the situation legally. To clarify and appraise the legal situation thereof, we also created a 30-page long shadow report and sent it to the first sitting of the Parliamentary Committee investigating the events.

The HCLU organised several civil actions to express sympathies for the Roma community and also participated in the civil action aiming to protect the Roma residents of another village from the demonstration of Jobbik.

Our blogger-journalist attends and reports on all sittings of the Parliamentary Committee on the HCLU's blog.

Since we have seen that the situation requires everyday presence, we have decided to move one of our colleges to live in Gyöngyöspata for four months starting from January, 2012. He is a former notary and he helps the locals with legal issues, mediation, press contacts and with his witnessing presence to handle the daily harassment of authorities and extremists.





IMPACT

In 2010, the Roma Program was launched as a pilot project with several innovative elements. By now, we have enough experience to say that our novel approach works, and the Program is much needed in Hungary, since no other organisation or authority fulfills the role we have taken on. Without our activity, thousands of underprivileged Roma people would stay without any help in these crucial times. Due to the complex, combined approach of the Program, it has achieved significant results on several levels of the systematic problems of the Roma minority:

EMPOWERED ROMA PEOPLE

Despite the short time that has passed since the launch of the Program, we have made significant progress in strengthening the right- and interest-enforcing capacities of the TASZPONT operators and their communities. Due to the legal background and other means (personal contacts, media contacts, etc.) provided by the HCLU, our activists have manifestly become more courageous and are more and more inclined to stand up for their own and their communities' rights. It is also apparent that the TASZPONT activists become more and more self-supporting and independent (based on information gained in former cases, they are often aware of the possible remedies and do not need to turn to us). Our attorneys have advised more than 350 cases so far and our local activists have counseled even more clients. We have also started a special program in which we train Roma activists on freedom of information issues and participatory rights so that they gain insight into local decision-making processes and step up against corrupt measures. In general, we believe that the presence of TASZPONTs itself raises the level of law awareness since underprivileged people gain knowledge on their rights and are provided with tools enabling them to enforce those rights.

LESS DISCRIMINATIVE AND ABUSIVE AUTHORITIES

In certain TASZPONT settlements, the level of discrimination has palpably diminished due to our presence. Certain communities (e.g. Sajóbáony, SÁta, Farkaslyuk) reported that since the launch of TASZPONTs, police have stopped intimidating and harassing Roma people on a daily basis. Moreover, some TASZPONT operators reported (e.g. Lak, Borsodbóta) that since the establishment of the TASZPONTs, policemen, employees of the public school, municipalities and even non-Roma people treat the Roma in a better manner than before.

STRONGER LEADERS - STRONGER COMMUNITIES

Due to the legal background provided by the skype legal support network, the trainings on legal issues, video making and web2 applications, as well as the different cultural and social programs offered through our community-organizing activities, TASZPONT operators have a good chance to strengthen their position in the community they live in. We have contributed to the emergence of several TASZPONT operators as leading personalities in their communities and also in the view of the entire settlement (the non-Roma community as well). Since the launch of the program, we have also successfully initiated cooperation between the different TASZPONT operators and their communities. TASZPONT operators keep communicating with each other on a daily basis, they regularly share experiences and knowledge, and assist each other in different projects and difficulties.

CRUCIAL ISSUES — POWERFUL LAWSUITS

Within the strategic representation plan, the Program's lawyer has undertaken 50 cases for representation in court or other authorities (police, prosecutor, notary, etc.) to this day. 21 cases have already been closed by now, out of which we achieved results that would not have been achieved had we not represented the client in eleven cases. Two HCLU Roma-related cases are pending at the European Court of Human Rights.

ACTIVE MEDIA PRESENCE

Due to our constant media activities (we have produced 16 advocacy films, 27 video messages and 63 blogposts) the discriminative actions against Roma are now a regular topic in the Hungarian media. No other organization makes fieldwork-based broadcasting from these communities, which makes our activities crucial in showing the real picture and problems of the underprivileged Roma's lives. Moreover, a simple survey of Roma-related conferences organized by the European Commission in Brussels in the last two years shows that fewer than 1 in 5 speakers are experts with hands-on experience on Roma issues. This means our fieldwork is essential not only to the general public, but to political decision-makers on the European level as well. Hungarian and foreign journalists of the most popular media platforms (the Guardian, der Spiegel, the Times, le Monde etc.) as well as UN Special Rapporteurs asked our fieldworkers to accompany them to the Roma communities and we witness the media becoming more and more interested in the issue.

Our videos and posts also appear on the most read news portals of Hungary, reaching tens of thousands of potential readers. Our colleagues regularly appear on TV, in radio interviews and in the electronic media. We consider it extremely important that university students – the next generation of decision-makers – become more and more sensitive to the issue, therefore we always have young volunteers in the Program.

SUPPORTED ROMA MINORITY IN GYÖNGYÖSPATA — INFORMED PUBLIC ON THE CRISIS

Among legal defense organizations, the HCLU has been the only one constantly present in the settlement from the very beginning of the illegal patrolling. Thanks to our active help, we have gained the trust of the Roma community and we are the only organization that regularly and impartially informs the media and the public of the events taking place in the village. The fact, that we have a colleague living there from Monday to Friday, provides a sense of security to the intimidated people. Due to his expertise, we can provide legal aid to a greater number of victims and combat the extremely discriminative attitude of the local authorities with much greater success.

We consider it crucial that the attempt of extremists and the mayor aiming to expell Roma from the village can be impeded, otherwise the horrible events at Gyöngyöspata will serve as a model for other communities with Roma minorities. We trust that our legal advocacy activities will contribute to the work and problem-solving capacities of the all-time government and precede the occurrence of similar situations in the future.

ACHIEVEMENTS IN NUMBERS TO THIS DATE

- Legal Aid Stations (TASZPONTs), where typical problems are pinpointed and handled have been established in 25 settlements;
- Around 350 clients have been advised by our attorneys through TASZPONTs; and the TASZPONT leaders advised countless other cases without the help of lawyers;
- 50 cases have been taken on for legal representation (21 were terminated);
- We have published 27 video-messages on our blog with the aim of ensuring the opportunity of publicity on the everyday concerns of Roma living in deep poverty;
- We have produced 16 advocacy films, among which is a 25 minute long film on the Gyöngyöspata events;
- 63 blogposts on the topic have been posted;
- In relation to the Roma Program's activities, our colleagues have been on TV and in the electronic media hundreds of times and have often been interviewed by different radio stations as well. Many of our standpoints concerning current issues have been published both in the print and electronic media.
- Several articles were written and published by Hungarian as well as foreign journalists accompanying fieldworkers.
- We created two cartoon strips titled 'Know your rights', one on victim's rights and one on patients' rights. These leaflets were distributed to thousands of underprivileged people and were presented at 9 trainings organised by the HCLU.

AWARDS

The HCLU's Roma Program won an honorary award, the **ERSTE Foundation Award for Social Integration** and also the **Practitioners' Award for Advocacy** in 2011. (The latter was an important feature of this year's Award: all 132 country winners were invited to vote for the best practice projects among themselves. The HCLU's Roma Program received the most votes in the advocacy category).

One of our previous advocacy short movies on the topic of evictions won a prize at the **Roma Docfilm Fest** (a Roma film festival in Central and Eastern Europe).

Three of our volunteer lawyers, who provide legal counseling via Skype for people seeking legal assistance from TASZPONTs, jointly won the **Pro Bono Attorney's Award** of the Hungarian Bar Association and PILnet (The Global Network for Public Interest Law).

Our Hungarian blog won the special prize of the professional jury of the **Goldenblog contest** in 2011, which is the most recognized blog contest of the country.

SUPPORT US SO WE CAN SUPPORT OTHERS

Since the launch of the Program, it became obvious that there are no similar complex programs for Roma in the region (Central-Eastern Europe) and we were asked to evaluate the Program's model for other countries as well. We believe that now, when the extreme right-wing 'Jobbik' is one of the most popular political parties in Hungary, the continuation of the project is not only crucial to Roma communities but to every other citizen as well.

The HCLU's Roma Program has been financed by the Open Society Institution from its launch in 2010. From 2012, the costs of the Program are only partially covered by the OSI, therefore we are constantly looking for further funding opportunities. If you can contribute to our work in any way, or should you be interested in the Program in greater detail, please contact:

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March, 2012. Budapest



