Dear Applicant,

I am writing to you because you are one of the 30 applicants, from among more than 250 who submitted concept notes, who have been invited to submit a full project proposal. We did not aim for quantity, and therefore many concept papers addressing important issues were declined. These decisions were made on the basis of our assessment that your concept papers were the best elaborated, which gave us reason to believe that you will submit better full project proposals than the others would have.

Our ambition is to demonstrate a new approach to advocacy in order to move the struggle for justice for Roma to the next stage: change. To achieve this, we need you to share the responsibility with you: through your energetic commitment, smart ideas and hard work. This has been our vision for the application process: it guided the way we wrote the call for applications, and how we have organized the review procedure and our ongoing consultations with you.

The conversations with you have been a most useful experience. By engaging with you in person or via Skype, we have learned much *from* you as well as *about* you, your organizations, the places where you work, your challenges and your ideas. I hope that you also found these conversations useful.

Although I have not had the privilege to meet all of you, I would like to share some of my reflections and learning from the meetings. At the end, I will provide some provocative questions. I hope that the notes and questions collected during our conversations will be helpful for your work on the full project proposal.

**Change-based, not activity-based, planning**

The conversations were very useful in challenging our thinking about change. We did not want you to precisely define what you want to change but instead wanted to hear your thinking about change as well as share our own. Of course, we expect you to define change precisely in your full project proposal. We encourage you to write about what you are going to change. This is more important than what you are going to do, in terms of activities, as we understand that it is very difficult to predict all the activities in the quickly changing context and political landscape in which we are not the major driver. We want your work and reporting to be about how close or how far you are from the change you wanted to bring about through your work, not about ticking boxes next to a list of activities. For this reason, we are going to assess your full project proposals on the basis of the clarity of your change objective and your contribution to bringing about that change.

For those of you aiming to work in a number of different places, aiming to bring about change locally, we have advised you that you do not need to generalize your objectives if the local contexts are very different. Instead, you can come up with a customized change objective for each and every place. This would help achieve precision.

**Lifting up “participation-based thinking” to “influence thinking”**

In certain countries, most if not all of the organizations with which we talked mentioned that elections and the votes of Roma are the predominant interests of decision-makers—not so much human rights arguments or international pressure as in years past. Of course, many have seen this from different angles: by talking with influential informal or “traditional” Roma leaders, by mobilizing voters, by talking with politicians or their friends, by exposing politicians to media or in some other way. A few of you also mentioned that Roma NGOs are approached as brokers for Roma votes and that this is an unfounded assumption of politicians because NGOs are not trusted by Roma or because NGOs do not necessarily try to gain the trust of Roma as voters.

Some of you have shared other ideas about how to “influence” decision-making. The term “lobbying” has been widely used, but, as I understood, you were talking about influence in a narrower sense: persuasion. The lobbying you mostly referred to is “having connections”; it isn’t about consistently or systematically engaging with legislators or policy-makers in face-to-face settings in order to have your proposals taken into account in their decisions.

However, we need to hear more about how you analyze the process of change: the institutions in charge, their agendas and timing of priorities, the formal and informal structures of power relationships, pressure points, etc. In my opinion, we need to go deeper in understanding the systems we aim to influence.

**Influence of the donor’s approach**

Too many of the conversations have revealed a defeating conclusion: your real ideas and work differ significantly from what you wrote in your concept papers. Most of you said that these ideas are not what donors would support, and therefore you did not want to write about what you really think can make a difference, but what you though we at the Open Society Foundations wanted to hear. Your assumptions about “eligible ideas” for donors are grounded in years of experience, and I am not judging you negatively here. Yet I am expressing our concern about this.

We want to have more honesty in our relationships with applicants and grantees. We strongly encourage you to tell us about your real work on what you really think can succeed. We are ready to hear, learn and adapt to what matters regarding change in your particular context. We want to learn from you about how you think we can make decision-makers demonstrate political will and about how you believe you can capitalize on “connections” in order to help bring about changes in policy decisions, public funding and the way civil servants deliver public services to Roma.

Of course, the Open Society Foundations cannot support political parties and candidates taking part in elections, or any other type of partisan project. We are, however, open to hearing your ideas about Roma exercising their civil and political rights (voting, among others) and also the rights to public information and organized participation. This is what we have tried to encourage through the call for concept papers by inviting your ideas about voter empowerment. We are ready to hear and learn from you how real advocacy work can work more meaningfully and be strengthened by the new tools we highlighted in our call.

It is up to you to take the risk and share this with us. It is up to us to adapt as much as we can in order to support organizations in making real progress and achieving their strategic objectives.

**Opportunity-driven or threat-driven advocacy**

We all need to learn how to recognize and utilize opportunities in the overall, mainstream, decision-making context. As you all know, the situation of Roma is grave everywhere, the scale of injustice is enormous, the threat of anti-Roma violence is greater than ever, and governments are unwilling or incapable to meet their promises. We all know this already, and there is no need to further repeat the known.

We do not know enough, however, about the opportunities to make progress and gain victories for Roma. These opportunities are not provided by our support for your projects, but through the mainstream—regular or extraordinary—decision-making processes related to either mainstream issues or to other minorities or other social groups—not only vulnerable groups. These opportunities might be parliamentary discussions about a law, a governmental policy priority, a legal case that could also be a precedent for Roma, planning or revision of a public budget, EU decision related to funding, elections, inter-ethnic conflicts, etc. They are bigger vehicles for decision-making driven by much larger political forces than a project on Roma. One of the most important elements of these opportunities is TIMING. These processes have their own time-lines and deadlines. You need to work according to them if you are hoping for bigger impact. Even your capacity-building projects could be connected to these opportunities and their timing. Otherwise, your projects and your work remain in isolation. We cannot afford to lose time and opportunities.

A few of you have demonstrated awareness about bigger political/policy processes and their timelines (i.e. new social welfare law, EU 2020-related policy, minority law revision, constitutional reform, regionalization) and recognition of the need to intervene. However, many have not been aware of other processes through which we could win: a local master plan and public funding for paving roads in Roma communities that would allow a school bus to take Roma kids to school; a law amendment that would help Roma businessmen and businesswomen to legalize their trade so that they can earn a pension; a governmental decree on social housing that would enable Roma to have decent shelter; a governmental decision that will obligate police prevent or react to violence against Roma; a decision on employing Roma in public administration. On the other hand, there might also be decisions that you aim to stand up against or block, for example, a governmental decision to segregate Roma or to enforce evictions.

These examples (all of which are only illustrations) are not related not to Roma strategies and action plans, but they build upon them. We need to ensure that measures from existing Roma-related strategies penetrate into mainstream policies. Appropriate financial and human-resource allocations will be much more likely for mainstream policies than for Roma strategies—which tend to be segregated and marginalized among policies, as the Roma are among peoples in the real life.

Some of you are involved in a few of these processes, but we have realized that others among you do not recognize that you can or should engage in them. Others, who are engaged in these processes, thought that you did not need to write about it because it was not important for us. I assure you that this information is extremely useful.

**Provocative, yet key questions**

After speaking with some of you, I thought that these sets of questions might help you in making a strong case for your project:

1. **What do you want to change? (Not “What do you want to do?”) How would the change look?**

**NOTE: the change objective needs to be defined by a noun not by a verb**

1. **How will this change happen? What and who will contribute to it? Who are those who decide about it, and what will make them decide as you want them to decide?**
2. **What will we lose if we do not support your project this year? What is the loss of opportunity that cannot be afforded? Why does your project need to be done now? Why can’t we wait until next year or the year after to support your project? Why can’t we support the training you propose at some other time? What is the deadline that is not set by you, but according to which you will work on the project for reaching your change objective?**

**NOTE: THE ANSWERS SHOULD NOT BE ABOUT THE NEEDS OR PROBLEMS OF ROMA, BECAUSE PROBLEMS EXIST EVERYWHERE. THE ANSWERS SHOULD BE ABOUT AN IMMINENT OPPORTUNITY OR THREAT THAT CAN BE USED MAKE PROGRESS TOWARD RESOLVING THE PROBLEMS OF ROMA.**

1. **Why can you (your organization, your coalition, your team and you individually) do this best?**

Your answers to these questions will guide our assessment because we have limited resources to support a limited number of the most urgent projects. Projects we look forward to supporting are those that can build a case for:

* **CHANGE** objectives that could be achieved through…
* **OPPORTUNITIES OR THREATS** grounded in ongoing or forthcoming…
* **EVENTS INFLUENCING DECISION-MAKING** about a law, policy, budget, power distribution/structure within…
* **TIME-FRAMES AND DEADLINES** that are set by others (political or social institutions, media, EU, academia, etc.) but which can be influenced or utilized by…
* **THE BEST TEAMS.**

If you have any reflections about the above, we would be grateful to hear from you.

We are eagerly waiting to read your full proposals. On behalf of the Roma Initiatives Office, I would like to express my appreciation and gratefulness for the conversations we have had.

Zeljko Jovanovic