

# **Romanistan** is everywhere

Tracing Treacherous Terrain

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# Organizing Activism

## Romedia Foundation – Acts Through (Social) Media

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Established in 1992, the *Romedia Foundation* has more than 20 years of experience as a Roma non-governmental organization. Providing new, fresh information from a different perspective on Roma to policymakers has been a key element of the foundation's activities, which include producing films, videos, international multi-media campaigns as well as public events.

Researchers have shown that Roma are the most negatively portrayed minority in Europe. In order for society to progress peacefully and democratically in the midst of a severe global economic crisis, there must be a more humane representation of one of its largest and most ignored minorities. The foundation works to promote the self-representation and empowerment of Roma activists and ultimately tackle and challenge the ingrained, centuries-old prejudices and misconceptions about Roma.

## Mundi Romani



Screenshots of *Faces of Change*

In 2007, the *Romedia Foundation* launched the project *Mundi Romani* under the slogan *The World Through Roma Eyes*. The project entailed the production of dozens of films on Roma in Europe and beyond, which were broadcast every month on the Hungarian *Duna TV Channel*. The monthly news documentaries were co-produced by the *Romedia Foundation* and *Duna TV*. Having won the competition organized by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) as part of its 2010 International Year for the Rapprochement, the project carried the UNESCO logo.

The documentaries covered a very wide range of issues concerning Roma and its fresh look at some troubling human rights situations caught the attention of the film community across Europe. To illustrate the role of *Mundi Romani* in promoting the Roma in a positive light and ultimately serving the aims of the *Romedia Foundation*, here are three films profiled below.

*Last Days of Sulukule*: For thousands of years, the Roma neighborhood of Sulukule in Istanbul's Old City was world famous for its unique culture, dancers and musicians. In recognition of its historical and cultural importance, UNESCO named Sulukule a World Heritage Site; however, this did not stop the Turkish government from demolishing the neighborhood in 2008. *The Last Days of Sulukule* was shot in the final weeks before bulldozers destroyed the historical district.

The documentary offers a glimpse of the now demolished community, exploring Sulukule's amazing music, people, and the complex mechanisms which have led to the destruction of minor-

ity cultures based on the interests and power of city developers and short sighted public officials. The documentary chronicles the all too common story of human and cultural destruction at the crossroads of Europe and Asia.

*Faces of Change:* In this episode, we explore the stories of ten exceptional Roma women from all over Europe. *Faces of Change* works to break the trend of depicting Roma women as “victimized victims” by presenting them as responsible and active stakeholders who readily provide their own answers to the questions raised by the situation of Roma today. The documentary challenges the way Roma women are viewed, by playing with the question of social identity and forcing the audience to question the artificial divisions on which our social perceptions are founded.

*Trapped – the forgotten story of the Mitrovica Roma:* Mitrovica is the sparking point of many Balkan wars. It is an ethnically divided town in northern Kosovo where the country’s independence from Serbia is a victory for the south yet an illegal aberration in the north. The town is also the scene of the gravest public health disaster in modern Europe. For nine years, hundreds of Roma have been trapped in refugee camps built by the UN administration in northern Mitrovica on the tailing sands of the biggest lead mine in Europe, next to a toxic slagheap of 100 million tons. In these camps, if the children don’t die by the age of six, they have irreversible brain damage for the rest of their inevitably short lives.

*Mundi Romani* reports from Mitrovica, Pristina, Skopje and Belgrade and provides an insight into the ethnic, economic and health dimensions of the current situation. Trapped between the fires of

Albanian and Serbian nationalism and ignored by international organizations, the Roma, a formerly prosperous minority in Tito’s Yugoslavia, remain the forgotten people of the newest country of Europe.

## Campaign I’m a Roma Woman

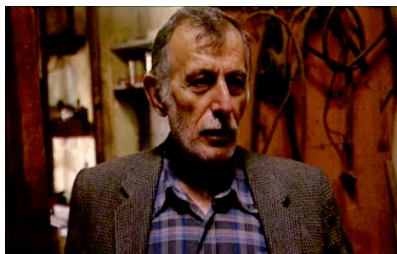
During the twentieth century, women’s struggle for gender equality has proven itself to be the best investment our societies could make towards world economic and social development.

Ninety years ago, could Europe have imagined that women would one day flood the workforce, gain the right to vote and even lead nations and prominent multinational companies? How do you see Roma women today? How do the women of Europe’s largest minority see themselves?

These questions had been on our minds for years when we started the Campaign *I’m a Roma Woman*. We lead a Roma media advocacy NGO based in Budapest, Hungary, and decided to start searching for our own answers.

At the beginning of 2009, we decided to release a campaign video together with Amnesty International Hungary for the International Women’s Day, focusing on Roma women’s activism. I gathered four of my friends and fellow activists living in Budapest, Hungary, and talked to them about the idea of participating in a common campaign. We five young women from all over Europe had met through years of common action and participation in the international Roma movement. They all agreed to participate in the video and talk about their experiences as Roma women. The next step was to organize a film shot without any financial





Screenshots of *Last Days of Sulukule*

support. The *Romedia Foundation* had been producing the *Mundi Romani* news documentary series in co-production with *Duna Television Hungary* for more than two years at that time. That meant we already had the experience, the contacts and access to the studio at *Duna TV* for the shooting.

I developed the video's concept and storyline together with Marion Kurucz, the *Romedia Foundation's* producer, and *Mundi Romani's* director of photography Csaba Farkas, an award-winning Roma cinematographer. The footage shown in between the women's "confessions" is taken from several *Mundi Romani* films we shot in Italy, Macedonia, Ukraine and Romania.

The video was released on YouTube on 8 March 2009 and screened on public screens all over Hungary; in metro stations, shopping centers, post offices, bars and restaurants for several days following the International Women's Day, reaching approximately 80,000 people in a few days. Growing interest from broadcasters and online media, as well as social network sites and word of mouth spread the campaign video around the world beyond all our expectations.

French MSN Messenger users could see the video pop up each time they connected to their MSN page. In the US, the more than ten million viewers of the famous blog for women jezebel.com could watch the campaign video and hear, many for the very first time, about who the Roma are.

A month after the release, in April 2009, the women featuring in the video held a common press conference in Sofia, Bulgaria, where the campaign's message was again brought to the fore, leading to increased coverage of the confer-

ence they were attending. The success of the campaign video led *CARE International North-West Balkans* to show interest in creating a follow-up featuring women activists involved in their Roma Women Empowerment Project. An outstandingly successful cooperation began between the *Romedia Foundation* and *CARE International*, which led to the release of the regional Campaign *I'm a Roma Woman* at the II. European Roma Summit in Cordoba, Spain, on 8 April 2010 (International Roma Day). The video features Roma women from Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia and was shot in a week of intense traveling through the Western Balkans using state-of-the-art filming technology and some of the very best camera, sound and lighting technicians of Hungary.

*CARE International* campaigned with the video throughout the Western Balkans and reached unprecedented coverage for such an issue. Many hours of television broadcast and TV appearances by some of the featured activists put the issues that Roma women in the region face into the media spotlight. The music for both the first and the second *I'm a Roma Woman* video was composed by one of Hungary's most famous jazz musicians, Gyula Babos. The lyrics were written for each video by fellow Roma activist Ágnes Daróczy, in Romani.

In both campaign videos, the women featured are real, flesh-and-blood activists who have fought their way through many obstacles to reach a level of self-confidence and dedication to Roma empowerment that is inspiring to us all. During the creative development process, we always looked for those women, those stories, those situations which came most naturally and reflected the

activists' self-awareness, acquired through years of social activism. When we began to produce videos and films focusing on a gender perspective, we had already been inspired by the hundreds of hours of audiovisual material we had shot across the world for the *Mundi Romani*. These women had shown us the fruits of their dedication and had opened up to our cameras about themselves, their lives, their identities, their goals and their dreams for the future.

We decided it was time to share all these experiences so that Roma women could inspire each other and the next generation. With the support of the *Open Society Foundations* (program *Roma Initiatives*) on International Women's Day 2011, we launched a campaign for all Roma women to speak out and be part of the transformation!

## The Future

In the digital space of social media, the possibilities for non-professionals to do journalism and become representatives of their communities and bearers of both progress and discrimination are significant. Civilians can play a crucial role in exposing human rights abuses and keeping a check on anti-discrimination measures on a local level, by recording video and reporting on these issues. NGOs must help in the creation and support such activities, despite ever decreasing funding. Our goal has always been for our films to not simply document but to also engage and to bring about change.

In order for us to be able to create effective outreach and engagement, we must be creative in finding all the outlets where we can channel our coherent, information-based messages and

in trying out all the new possibilities to address audiences.

Independence and objectivity are the two most important assets that we must guard fiercely so that changes in financing structures and reigning political ideologies of the day cannot easily influence us. In order to keep up such independence, both our sources and instruments must be diversified.

[romediafoundation.org](http://romediafoundation.org)  
[mundiromani.com](http://mundiromani.com)  
[romawoman.org](http://romawoman.org)

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Screenshots of  
*Trapped – the forgotten story of the Mitrovica Roma*