



On the Record: Civil Society in Kosovo – Rebuilding After the War

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From the AP Editorial Desk by Iain Guest

It has been a long time since there was good news from Kosovo about minorities. But just as this issue of *On the Record* was about to go out, word came that representatives of Kosovo's Roma population had met with Ibrahim Rugova, Kosovo's leading politician, in an effort to stop attacks against the Roma by Albanians, and also discuss the return of Roma refugees.

Also present at the meeting, which took place in Prishtina on April 12, were leaders of the Ashkali and Egyptian communities, which are related to the Roma but see themselves as distinct.

This was the first time the Albanian and Roma leaders had met since the end of the war last June. Hopefully it might signal an end to a disastrous year for Kosovo's minorities.

Before the war, Kosovo's population stood at roughly 2.3 million. Like so much of the Balkans, it was a mosaic of minorities - Serbs, Roma (also known as gypsies), Muslim Slavs, Turks, Gorani, and Croats.

Most have now fled the province. For example, out of the 20,000 Serbs that lived in Prishtina before the war, fewer than 800 now remain. But Kosovo is not yet mono-ethnic. Throughout the province, ethnic pockets are still clinging on. In one village, Janjevo, twenty-two Roma are living alongside 450 Croat-speakers and a thousand Albanians. The Croats are descended from a group of craftsmen who came from Dubrovnik centuries ago. This volatile mix has been maintained thanks to the efforts of religious leaders.

Of all the minorities, the Roma are finding it hardest to survive as a community. Roma started leaving Kosovo long before the NATO bombing, but the exodus accelerated after the end of the fighting on June 12 last year. A February 28 report on minorities by the Organization of Security

and Cooperation Europe (OSCE) put the current number of Roma at around 29,000. There is wide agreement that over 80,000 have fled Kosovo.

The most striking difference between the Roma and other minorities is their lack of self-confidence and organization. The Roma is the only minority group that has no political representation: Turks and Bosniaks, who are far smaller in number, have two parties apiece. (Even the Serbs are represented by two groups.) Muslim Slavs publish two newspapers, the Roma have none. Before the war, Prizren was a thriving Roma center but today it is Turks, Slavs and Serbs that are making the running in Prizren. All three groups are setting up nongovernmental organizations. The Roma have set up none.

How to account for this? One explanation is that all of the Roma leaders have left. Some feel that those who remain have become too fragmented to organize. The OSCE report suggested, for example, that the Roma population is 'so diverse that it is not clear that any one party could represent the interests of its constituent communities.'

Some international officials in Kosovo perceive a deeper malaise among the Roma, namely an inability to produce leaders and take control of their lives. This view is particularly prevalent among West Europeans, many of whom have a deep prejudice against gypsies.

One town stands out as an exception in this gloomy story. Prior to the outbreak of fighting on March 24 last year, the town of Ferizaj had a thriving, active community of Roma and other minorities. Since the war, they have been repeatedly harassed and attacked. But 4,200 members of these minorities remain.

They include 3,700 Ashkali. Instead of taking to flight, these Ashkali have taken to the ballot box and formed a political party. Known formally as the 'Ashkaelia Democratic Party of Kosovo,' it was registered in December. Its stated aims include representation for the entire Roma population, but it is first and foremost for Ashkali.

The emergence of a new political party for minorities is exciting, but also unnerving. For one thing, it carries obvious physical risks. As the recent OSCE report noted, some Roma are unwilling to even be identified as belonging to minority out of fear: 'in some instances, safety may depend on a denial of ethnic origins.'

But the real controversy in Ferizaj is about whether a party on behalf of the Ashkali is justified. Many ethnologists maintain that the Ashkali are descended from former Roma who stopped speaking the Romany language long ago and have since become assimilated by the Albanians. The real motivation of the Ashkali in claiming an identity, according to this view, is to distance themselves from the Roma, who are hated by the Albanians.

Finally, some look at the origin of the new fledgling party and see a vehicle for the ambitions of its president, Sabit Rrahmani. Sabit, they feel, is pandering to the international agencies and doing what is expected of him. But this is opportunism, not democracy.

Last December, On the Record travelled to Ferizaj to meet the man in the middle. 24-year old

Sabit Rrahmani is soft-spoken. He does not fit the image of a political firebrand. Nor does he strike one as a manipulator of aid agencies. (In fact, he works for one, the Lutheran aid agency).

In all of his actions and pronouncements, Sabit strikes a cautious note. He stresses the importance of prudence and realism, and of not provoking the Albanian majority. But his message is bold: 'The best way for a beleaguered minority to defend itself is through political representation.'

It requires tact and skill to steer a course through such a minefield. This alone makes Sabit a politician to watch

From Iain's diary

There is no sadder spot in Prishtina than the huge, half-completed Orthodox Church of Christ the Savior. It sits on a large patch of open ground next to the university, and on a clear day its gilded dome glistens in the sun like a beacon. When the weather turns foul, it rises up out of the mist, huge, solid and reassuring as befits a sacred building.

Up close, however, the church is under siege. It is ringed by barbed wire and guarded around the clock by NATO troops who are determined to discourage attacks. Assailants tried to burn it down last June. Three months later on August 1, at one o'clock in the morning, they planted four mines inside. Only two went off, but it was still enough to rattle the structure.

Every Orthodox church in Kosovo suffers the same mournful fate. In a way, you can understand it. To many Albanians, the Church of Christ was built in anger by the Serbian authorities. Its construction started after 1989, illegally, and on the grounds of the university campus. But now it is deeply symbolic. Instead of places of worship, the Orthodox churches have become symbols of division and hatred - and a reminder of the bewildering change that has befallen Kosovo's minorities, particularly Serbs.

Profile: Sabit Rrahmani, Ashkali Politician on a Tightrope

It is clear from the briefest of visits that Ferizaj has been affected by terrible violence. Several weeks after the last riots, the buildings still seem to smolder. You can almost smell the dampened fires.

The explanation is simple enough: Kosovo's Albanians feel that the Roma have long sided with the Serbian authorities. Their anger and resentment boiled to surface during last year's crisis.

Tito's Yugoslavia was more tolerant towards ethnic minorities than other East European countries. In fact, the country was constructed in order to prevent the domination of any one ethnic group. This benefited the Roma, who had official minority status. In Kosovo the Romany language was both spoken and taught in schools.

According to Andrzej Mirga, a Rom from Poland who is an advisor to the Council of Europe, Kosovo's Roma were loyal to the state not to Serbian politicians, and they continued to respect the state as long as it respected them. This meant that they did not automatically join the

Albanians after 1989 when Serbia revoked Albanian autonomy over Kosovo.

This was bound to be interpreted as siding with Serbia, and Roma reinforced the impression by supporting Serbia's peace initiatives in Kosovo during the late 1990s. One Roma journalist joined the Serbian-controlled Executive Council, which was rejected by the Albanians. Koka Ljukan, a leading member of the National Community of Roma, attended the Rambouillet conference as a member of the Serbian delegation. By the time that war broke out last year, Kosovo's Roma were seen as firmly in the Serbian camp.

The Roma are accused of burying large numbers of Albanians who were killed by Serbian forces and paramilitary. It is hard to imagine a more emotive charge. In one of the few acts of violence among Kosovar refugees, two Roma men were almost beaten to death in the Macedonian camp of Stenkovac after one was found by an Albanian refugee to be wearing a locket that had belonged to his murdered father. It turned out that the Roma had taken the locket when he buried the body.

Yet according to a report last year by the respected Humanitarian Law Center in Prishtina, many of these wartime burials were forced on the Roma, often brutally. One Roma woman told the Center how her relatives had been forced to bury dead bodies that were in advanced stages of decomposition, without gas masks or proper equipment. On one occasion they realized that they were burying a living man. He begged them to keep quiet, but they panicked and told the foreman, who ordered the man killed. One thirteen year-old boy told of having been taken by truck with other youngsters and ordered to load ammunition and grenades. They worked from morning to night, with very little food, even during the fighting.

Not all of the Roma acts can be explained by Serbian brutality. There are too many stories of the Roma actively taking sides with the Serbs during the war to discount. But the Roma themselves are adamant that they should not be forced to suffer for the actions of a few. Any Roma who committed a crime should be prosecuted as a criminal, they say.

A Question of Identity

Sabit Rrahmani is an Ashkali not a Roma. The first question is whether the distinction even exists.

To Sabit the answer is clear. The Roma are thought to have come originally from India and speak a language descended from Indian sanskrit, but the Ashkali claim to have come from Egypt between 300 and 600 AD. Ashkali have their own distinctive form of dress, music, and marriage. They speak Albanian, not Romany. They also registered as Albanians during the 1991 census, not as Roma.

To Sabit, this is more than enough basis for claiming a separate identity for the Ashkali. But some are not convinced. Either the Ashkali as descended from Roma, in which case they are really Roma. Or they must be Albanian. To conjure up a new identity has no basis in history. More important, they say, it makes no sense: even the recent OSCE report on minorities suggests that the Roma are now so fragmented that they find it hard to speak with one voice. According to

this view, the Ashkali have done their fellow gypsies a deep disservice.

This is felt most deeply by those Roma who have been driven from their homes through no fault of their own and who wear their ethnicity like a badge of honor. They feel betrayed by the Ashkali, who seem to be distancing themselves from the Roma to escape the stigma instead of helping in their hour of need

Sabit's first task is to rebut these charges. Ashkali and Roma have lived together in close proximity in the three suburbs of Ferizaj (Dubrava, Salahane, and Metvici). But he said, with a touch of defiance, they live in separate houses.

His own story is of a man trying to straddle different identities. He is Muslim by religion, and lives in Dubrava, a small country town ten kilometers from Ferizaj. The population is entirely Ashkali, and their record during the war was ambivalent.

On the one hand, fourteen villagers in Dubrava were conscripted by Serbian forces to fight in the war. They maintained it was under duress, but they were certainly fearful when the resurgent Kosova Liberation Army (KLA) moved into the area after the fighting stopped. One of the fourteen was briefly arrested. On the other hand, over a third of Dubrava's population fled into exile with Albanians during the war. Four villagers were arrested while working in Serbia and were still in detention last December. Such things did not happen to friends of Serbia.

Sabit's own credentials are solidly anti-Serb. Before the war, he was president of the Mother Teresa Society branch in Dubrava, which served as the central distribution point for all emergency assistance. He was also captain of the Dubrava football team. It was the only Ashkali team in the region and it did exceptionally well, winning the municipal championship. Needless to say, Sabit played striker.

His prowess at soccer made Sabit dangerous to the Serbs, who were constantly trying to curb sports events in Kosovo out of fear that they would get out of control and spark a riot. Sabit went to the town of Podujevo for a game in December 1998, and was detained by Serb police. They noticed from his ID card he was from Ferizaj and when they found out he was a soccer player they kept him for eighteen days. When he was released, he left for Syria to complete his studies as a Muslim religious leader (hoxha).

He returned to Dubrava after the war to find the villagers demoralized and divided, and quickly assumed the role of leader. It helped that he had been prominent in the parallel government of Dubrava before the war, and he had gained kudos from his arrest by the Serbs. He was also well connected, because his uncle was president of the LDK (Albanian political party) in Dubrava.

But as Sabit's profile grew, so did the danger. Late in the summer, a gang attacked Sabit and tried to force him into a car. At first he thought it was his friends testing out an emergency procedure they had been practicing. He quickly changed his mind and saw the attackers off with a knife.

Relations with the Albanians

Sabit Rrahmani maintains that his ethnic identity is what he wants it to be, and the same goes for his people. The real question, he suggests, is pragmatic: can the new party survive?

The answer may lie with Sabit's Albanian neighbors. However hard it might be to separate themselves from the Roma, it is infinitely harder for the Ashkali to draw a clear distinction with the Albanians, whose language (and even sympathies) they share. But as is the case with any minority, it is the majority that holds the key to their survival.

The Ashkali have taken a huge gamble. This is because the more they insist on their difference from Albanians, the more they will be viewed as Roma by the Albanians and blamed for siding with the Serbs. This has already exposed them to the violence of the thuggish gangs that operate in the shadow of the Kosova Liberation Army (KLA).

The violence began to lap at Dubrava in the late summer. A pregnant woman was attacked and raped in November. A house was looted in broad daylight. In a particularly serious attack in December, one Roma and two Ashkali were kidnapped in the municipality, and two were killed, execution-style.

Sabit raged against this escalation of violence. But he was careful to put it down to 'marauders' and 'outsiders' - anything but ethnic Albanians. On a pragmatic note, he pushed the villagers of Dubrava into organizing two-man patrols and made sure to tell KFOR soldiers to look out for any group of more than two when they visited Dubrava.

Sabit strove hard to deflect Albanian anger at the collaboration in the war of the fourteen Dubrava villagers. He took it on himself to negotiate with the KLA, and won a reprieve. He argued that Dubrava had earned some leeway, because it had been harshly treated in the war. Albanians and Ashkali had both suffered at the hands of a common enemy, he suggested.

Among his own people, he made much of the ordeal suffered by the Albanians at the hands of Serbian forces and paramilitaries, and urged his fellow Ashkali to demonstrate their sympathy in a concrete manner. One hundred and thirty volunteered to clean Albanian houses. Sabit and three others even removed 42 kilos of explosives from the offices of the LDK. It was very brave and also very foolish - but it helped to demonstrate where their sympathies lay.

It was a delicate balancing act. On the one hand, Sabit was doing everything to avoid confronting the Albanians - in contrast to the normal noisy approach of most minority representatives. On the other hand, he was quietly trying to foster an Ashkali identity, even though this was likely to be defined in terms of opposition to the Albanian majority. Even before his party was launched, Sabit was acting like a veteran politician.

Grassroots Support For The Party

By October, Sabit had persuaded a number of Ashkali that the time had come to speak with one voice, and that this could only be done by creating a political party. It was not plain sailing by any means. Some worried about the implications. Others suspected a power play by Sabit. Still

others wondered whether, if they took the plunge, they would get the necessary support from the international agencies.

But he pushed ahead. Three representatives were chosen by each of the three Ashkali communities (Metvici, Salahane, and Dubrava). They all met for a long session in Ferizaj, at which several prominent Ashkali voiced doubts. But Sabit persisted, and a second meeting was held which overrode the objections.

A third meeting was called to launch the actual party. It was attended by sixty representatives, some elders, and officials from the OSCE who were surprised and delighted by this turn of events. The meeting put the proposal to a vote, and it was accepted. Nine Ashkali were elected to a board, with Sabit as president.

They spent the next month consolidating the organization. The committee met every three days, usually in Ferizaj. They needed money, but much more important they needed the confirmation of commitment that contributions would represent. They were starting to flow when we met Sabit in early December. Each Ashkali family was asked to contribute one D-mark every two weeks, and after three weeks, the committee had 900 D-marks in the kitty and were wondering how to spend it. A car, to make it easier to meet in all three villages? Two computers, to help the committee print literature?

While they wrestled with these decisions, they were also putting into place a system of oversight by designating one of the board to issue receipts to contributors. It was a small step on the road to accountability and to democracy. By December, there had been two articles in the press about the new party.

This process of institution-building provided the glue for the fledgling party, and allowed for the harder decisions to be postponed. Sabit knew that campaigning around an issue - any issue - would attract members and raise the party's profile. But he also knew that it would risk being seen in ethnic terms. The closest Sabit came was to argue that Ashkali should be registered separately in the event of elections, or for enrolment in a new census. He also favored support for pre-school education for Ashkali children.

But all this was like supporting motherhood. Sabit was not yet ready to define minority rights in terms of grievance and hurt, of which there was plenty. When we met him, he was seeking a goal - something around which his party could mobilize, without provoking their neighbors.

Our visit was too short to hint at the extent and nature of opposition, but some of Sabit's friends made it clear that he had made enemies. Some resented his high profile. Others looked for tangible benefits, and were angry that his forceful style had not brought more emergency aid or security.

In one telling episode, OSCE officials, took him to visit a large group of 266 Ashkali/Roma who had fled from their homes and were camped out in an emergency settlement (Obilic). Sabit gave an uplifting talk and seemed to win over the Ashkali leader, who also talked of forming a party on the spot. Later, however, the man broke his word and encouraged them to leave. It was a crushing disappointment that seemed to cast doubt on Sabit's ability to win people over.

The Humanitarian Perspective

How do the international agencies view the new party? To some extent, the answer is dictated by their view of the crisis buffeting Kosovo's minorities.

To the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the challenge is humanitarian. Most Ashkali families in Ferizaj dare not send their children to school. Ashkali and Roma have been turned away from health centers. They have received less than they share of emergency food aid. There is almost no employment for them. Those that are working are all employed by international agencies or at the huge US military base (Camp Bondsteel) which is being built nearby. Sabit himself is a social worker with the Lutheran relief agency ADRA.

UNHCR officials in Ferizaj argue that the solution to this crisis is food, housing, clothing, and medical care - not political representation. To present these humanitarian problems in political terms, they said, creates confrontation and makes it harder to come up with a solution.

From the start, UNHCR has forsaken confrontation for quiet diplomacy. When the Mother Teresa Society was found to be denying emergency food aid to Ashkali in Ferizaj, UNHCR invited Jak Mita, the much-respected Vice President of the Society, to visit Ferizaj. Mita made it clear that withholding humanitarian aid on the grounds of ethnicity was unacceptable

UNHCR followed up by insisting that the Mother Teresa Society establish a separate food distribution point in Dubrava for Ashkali, manned by Ashkali employees. UNHCR also changed the criteria for distributing emergency food aid, so as to ensure that minorities were included in those who qualified for priority treatment. (Previously this was reserved mainly for those who lost their houses in the war).

This was quiet diplomacy at work. Whenever UNHCR officials found that people had been denied medical treatment, she arranged for them to be driven by UNHCR to a health clinic (ambulanta.) The patients would receive their treatment while UNHCR would plead with the doctors to do better in future. To UNHCR this was way to coopt local leaders and build confidence between the ethnic groups. The creation of a political party in Ferizaj, said one UNHCR official, was 'naïve, premature and probably counterproductive.'

A Leader At Last

The Organisation of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) saw Sabit's initiative very differently. Unlike UNHCR, the OSCE is trying to coax democracy from Kosovo's barren soil, and Sabit Rrahmani is the right man in the right place at the right time. He is doing what the OSCE desperately wants to do, which is to inculcate a sense of pride and resolve in Kosovo's gypsies.

The great failure of Kosovo's Roma, in the eyes of the international agencies, has always been their inability to produce leaders. Initially this baffled and irritated many aid officials, who tend to describe the Roma as 'rudderless' and 'passive.' It stood in sharp contrast to Kosovo's Serbs

and Albanians, who seemed to be stiffened by a common sense of purpose (or grievance). Describing the massive exodus of Roma from towns like Ferizaj in the summer, one aid worker said that when a Roma family felt threatened the entire street would panic.

Throughout last year, there was a profound lack of communication between aid officials and the Roma. West Europeans in particular had trouble appreciating the Roma, and few even made the effort.

One of the few was Judith Kiers from the OSCE, who accompanied us to Ferizaj to meet Sabit. She made no secret of her enthusiasm for the new party and its charismatic leader. Sabit's party was all the more welcome for being home-grown. This seed was not planted by the OSCE.

But Judith also understood the skepticism. When she first heard of Sabit's initiative, she contacted specialists at the OSCE's office for democracy and human rights in Warsaw and asked what attitude to take. The answer was 'be encouraging.' She was told that the new party might take root or it might wither, but either way it was all part of the great experiment in democracy. Certainly, it was far better to make the attempt than not try at all.

The OSCE followed through by recruiting two Roma specialists for its mission in Kosovo. Over the last few months, the OSCE has shown itself to be far more sensitive to the needs of the Roma than other agencies in Kosovo. This has helped to elevate the Roma as a priority within the UN mission.

The only problem is that it comes too late. Furthermore, the advice given to Judith made democracy sound like venture capital. It was as if the more democracy that could be sprinkled around, the better the chance some of it would produce a return.

But of course, people's lives were at stake. What would happen if Sabit went too far out on a limb, and it cracked? What if he overplayed his hand, and angered the KLA - or attracted the bullet of an assassin? Would the OSCE be there in his corner?

Gambling on Democracy

The answer to this depends, to a large extent, on whether the international community has managed to create a suitable climate in Kosovo for new political initiatives. If not, then supporting Sabit Rrahmani could be at best an empty gesture. At worst, it could increase the risk to him.

The UN administrators in Kosovo have two practical ways of supporting a minorities. They can offer political incentives, or administrative responsibilities.

On the political side, conventional wisdom has it that participating in an election is the best way to stimulate political parties. The UN has announced that municipal elections will be held in October, but first parties will have to be registered. When On the Record last checked, some were predicting that a political party would need a substantial level of organization, membership and regional representation to qualify. This, they said, was bound to favor the three largest

Albanian parties - but penalize minorities.

If true, it might derail much of what Kosovo's minorities have achieved so far, and in spite of everything there is progress to report. As was noted earlier, almost all the minorities are now represented by political parties. Minorities have formed NGOs, opened newspapers, and started radios.

The second way to support minorities is to give them a share in the interim administration of their country. The UN has set up a Transitional Council, which serves as a kind of cabinet to involve local leaders in decision-making. Four seats are reserved for Serbs two for Turks and two for Muslim Slavs, but only one for Roma. In addition, nineteen administrative departments have been set up to run Kosovo. Two will be headed by Serbs, one by a Turk and one by a Bosniak. There is no role for the Roma.

All of the recent attention has been on whether the Serbs will participate, or continue to boycott these structures - as they have done since they were first established last year. There was welcome news on April 12, when Rada Trajkovic, a Serb doctor, attended a meeting of the Council for the first time - raising hopes that Kosovo's Serbs were ready to cooperate. But the single seat reserved for Roma has not been filled. UN officials feel they cannot decide which group should take it.

This confirms the widespread impression that the Roma lack cohesion and initiative. Yet there is the striking example of the new Ashkali party in Ferizaj. Why is there no role for Ashkali in the administrative structures being developed?

It is still not too late. The Interim Administrative Council will establish municipal councils to run the municipalities. Presumably this would cover the entire range of services. It would make sense to reserve seats for Ashkali in towns like Ferizaj, where they are numerous, vocal, and have demonstrated an ability to manage emergency relief aid. This would provide the new party with clear goals.

But it would also represent a gamble for the international community. If Sabit and his party are legitimate, this would be their just reward. But what if he is driven by ambition? What if his Ashkali are cynically trying to abandon the forlorn Roma, as cynics suggest? In that case, bestowing such a mantle on his party might well deepen the isolation of the Roma.

It is quite a dilemma. But then, Sabit has gone out on a limb for democracy. Perhaps the international community should follow suit.

From Iain's diary

Igo Rogova, who runs the women's group Motrat Qiriazhi told me that her house had twice been attacked by Roma during the war. 'I hated them for it,' she said. But shortly before we met, a Swedish group named Women to Women arranged for a prominent Roma woman lawyer from Macedonia to visit and talk to Roma in Kosovo. Igo found the experience profoundly moving. Afterwards, they spent hours together talking about what the Roma are suffering. 'But the end, I

was crying,' said Igo. 'I forgot what they did to me. Now I want to talk reconciliation with the Roma. But I came to it in my own time.'

The Advocacy Corner

The international community was late in responding to the violence that overwhelmed the Roma in Kosovo last year. That it responded at all was due to the efforts and advocacy of the increasingly articulate Roma community in Europe, and the Balkans.

Contrary to the highly disparaging image of the gypsy that prevails in Western Europe, the Roma have organized an impressive international lobby that cuts across national boundaries. This has resulted in the creation of new posts in the Council of Europe and OSCE. It has also attracted international attention to examples of gross discrimination, and produced some concrete results.

But the success of a lobby depends as much on the local Roma, as their allies abroad. One excellent example of this was in Bosnia, where the Roma were initially denied humanitarian aid because they did not fall into one of the three religious categories that received UN aid. The Roma were treated savagely by the Serbs in Eastern Bosnia, and most of their children were forced to beg in the streets.

By a supreme effort, the Roma in the town of Tuzla organized themselves and then sought help from the European Roma movement. They forced UNHCR to provide humanitarian aid, and persuaded Norway's NATO contingent to give medical aid to their elderly. With money from the International Romany Union, they put their children back into school. Alerted by the publicity, students from Berlin visited, and raised money for four Roma students from Tuzla to attend university in Berlin.

They canvassed Roma in Poland and Czechoslovakia for ideas, and were advised to create a political party. Once they had a solid core of members, they used this to levy a fee from Roma families, registered as many as possible to vote in the forthcoming municipal elections, and invited the mayoral candidate to a meeting. By the eve of elections, they had a burning issue to unite them: twenty-nine families near Tuzla were facing eviction, to make way for a cultural center. This threat as much as anything politicized the Bosnian Roma. In February 1997, they held their first major festival. Roma from all over Bosnia, and the Balkans, attended.

This was an inspiring example of how Roma can take control of their lives, if they have specific goals and the right kind of support from abroad. It is also testament to the power of the European Roma movement. There are obvious lessons here for Kosovo. It is no coincidence that Sabit Rrahmani's first major contribution looks like coming from Germany.

At the same time, the international Roma movement may find it as difficult as the UN agencies to adjust to the emergence of the Ashkali as a separate and distinct political entity in Kosovo. According to Andrzej Mirga, the international movement sees itself as representing Roma and reinforcing Roma identity. It was disconcerting when Hungary's Roma achieved the passage of a law in 1993 granting them virtual autonomy - and then named themselves 'gypsies.'

Some Roma campaigners may view Ashkali aspirations as divisive and threatening. This may present the powerful and articulate European Roma movement with a new challenge.

Voices That Matter

- The **Council of Europe** is the main international institution working on behalf of Europe's 8 to 10 million Roma. Consult the Council web page for reports and initiatives.
- The **Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe** (OSCE) last year created the post of an advisor on Roma at the OSCE office for human rights in Warsaw. Max Van der Stoel, the OSCE's High Commissioner for National Minorities monitors the situation of minorities in the OSCE region. For information, contact **John Packer**.
- The Roma are the only minority mentioned by name in the Agenda 2000 document that sets out criteria to be met by new application to join the European Union. Respecting Roma rights is one of the conditions for membership. This is one of the campaign's major achievements.
- The **European Roma Rights Council** (ERRC) is run by non-Roma, but works to defend the rights of Roma at the Council of Europe. It publishes an excellent newsletter.
- The **Romany National Congress** campaigns for the rights of Roma, with particular emphasis on their civil and political rights. This is partly explained by the background of its current leadership, which issues from (formerly West) Germany and has a tradition of commitment to civil rights.
- The International Romany Union's traditional support has been strongest in the former Communist countries of Eastern Europe. As a result, it has tended to stress social and economic rights. The Soros foundation is helping to establish a central office of the Union in Brussels which can coordinate its network. It does not yet have a web address.
- The Project on Ethnic Relations (Princeton, NJ) has developed extensive expertise on the Roma as part of its work to prevent ethnic conflict.

Further reading: The OSCE mission in Kosovo has produced four reports on minorities in Kosovo.