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‘Letter to Stalin’: Roma Visions on Gypsy Policy in the Early USSR

In recent years, the topic of a need for a thorough critical rethinking of Romani Studies has become more and more relevant in order to reflect the viewpoint of the research community itself. This problem, however, not only has its modern dimensions but is also historically relevant. Until now, in the research of Roma history in the region of Central, Southeastern and Eastern Europe, the main emphasis has been on the various government policies implemented towards Roma, presenting them as a passive objects of these policies. This approach loses one, extremely important research aspect - presenting and understanding the attitudes of the Roma communities towards these policies, and their attempts to become an active political subject and the creator of their own destiny.

In the period between the two World Wars, throughout Southeastern and Central Europe processes of national awakening and civil emancipation among the Roma have actively developed, resulting in the creation of various Roma/Gypsy civic, humanitarian, professional and religious organizations in many of the countries in the region (for example: Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Greece, Romania, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Latvia). They tried, through various ways and means, to improve the situation of Roma and enhance their overall social position. In their diversity, these organizations were united by a single principle - they had no direct connection with state institutions and local authorities, thus they were deprived of the opportunity to exert their direct influence on the implementation (or more often on the non-implementation) of state policy concerning their respective communities, in the countries in which they lived. Many have desperately sought to engage with the authorities and to use established ties for personal and/or community purposes. However, they failed to have a direct impact on the state policy and, even more, in most cases their activities were hindered by authorities.

During the same period, the case of Roma civic activism in the USSR, and its relations with the state apparatus regarding the policy towards “Gypsies” (in the USSR, this category included not only Roma but other communities as well), differed radically. It is generally believed that Roma civic activism in the USSR was a political construct created by the Soviet state and that it was a direct

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function of state policy and an active instrument in its realization. In fact, the situation was more complex and ambiguous. Gypsy policy in the early Soviet Union (1920s and 1930s) was organically embedded in the general paradigm of the Soviet national policy of this time, as its inseparable part and integral component. In recent years, this common national policy has been commonly referred in academic studies by using a term forged by soviet bureaucracy, "korenisatsia", although the well-known definition introduced by Terry Martin (2001) "affirmative action" is much more accurate and adequate reflection of its essence and its objectives. The definition 'policy of affirmative action' is also valid for soviet Gypsy politics at that time, which can be described as pro-Gypsy, and in this sense the emerging new elite community of Roma activists is the very product of this policy, if not as its direct creation, at least as an offspring of the appropriate socio-political context allowing this elite to emerge and to develop with the active support of Soviet party and state structures.

The analysis of recently collected historical sources shows that, to a very high degree, the state policy of the Soviet state had arisen and was developed as a result of ideas and concrete proposals coming from Roma activists themselves. Thus, Roma activists do not appear as merely passive performers of party and state directives, but as active subjects in the process of their conception and implementation; they are positioned as individuals who offer and participate in the implementation of the state Gypsy policy. Of course, here we cannot but note that the initiatives of Roma activists often remarkably coincided with the general direction of the minority policy of the early USSR. The cooperation of Roma activists with the Party and State Soviet nomenclature was, however, far from equal. They were a subordinate part in this process and the decisive word on what would or would not be accepted (and how it will be implemented) belonged to the Soviet state. Nevertheless, Roma activists were the ones who set out and defined (or at least tried to define) the future of their community in the new Soviet realities.

The active leading position of Roma activists is clearly evident in the establishment of their civic organization, the All-Russian Union of Gypsies. In January, 1924 it was decided to create a Gypsy Union, firstly under the name "the Lenin Society for the Organization of the Proletarian Backward Gypsy Masses of Moscow and Moscow Governorate". An organisation's statute was drafted, and sent for concurrence with the various administrative and political institutions. Together with this, Roma personalities with appropriate biographies have been attracted to lead the new Union, The position of chairman was offered to Andrei Taranov. He was a Communist Party member, participant in the Civil War in the composition of the legendary First Cavalry Army (known also as the Budyonny's Cavalry Army), trained in The Communist University of the Toilers of the East. The post of secretary was allocated to Ivan Lebedev (later known under the pseudonym Ivan Rom-

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Lebedev). He was the leader of the first Gypsy Komsomol Group, established in 1923, famous for organising the participation of Gypsies at the 1st of May demonstration under the slogan "Gypsies of the world, unite!" (a paraphrase of the most famous rallying cries from the Communist Manifesto: "Workers of the world, unite!").

As a result of the recommendations received from respective institutions, from the name of the union Lenin's name was dropped, and its spatial scope was extended, thus the new official name became the 'All-Russian Union of Gypsies living on the territory of the RSFSR' (Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic).

Examining the programming documents of the new organization all institutions concerned, despite some remarks, expressed their support for the establishment of a Gypsy public organization. The reaction of the last instance at the top of the pyramid, namely from the Central Committee of the All Soviet Communist Party (Bolsheviks) (ЦК ВКП(б) [TsK VKP(b)]), the sub-division 'National Minorities' of the Agitation and Propaganda Department, was especially significant. It noted:

“...Given that the Gypsies are starting to set up their own public organization for the first time ever and that we have had no any approach to them so far, I consider appropriate to register their statute. We will keep an eye on their work and maybe we will find among them fully appropriate elements for the inclusion of their masses to the new life.”

The quote clearly shows that the creation of the Union was not an idea of Soviet authorities. They were surprised by its appearance, and supported it with hope (but without being fully convinced) that the new organization will probably succeed in their activities regarding the Gypsy population.

The complex and contradictory relations between Roma activism and the policy of the Soviet state towards the Gypsies are particularly significant in regard to one of the key issues of this policy - the attitude towards the Gypsies leading the nomadic way of life. From the very beginning of the academic interest in the so-called “Gypsies” in Western Europe, the nomadic way of life is considered to be their most important and most significant social and cultural characteristic that distinguishes them from other European nations and is the main pillar of their community identity. From this point of view, the sedentarisation, carried out in the countries from so-called socialist bloc in Eastern Europe from the 1950s to the 1970s continues to be condemned as an example of the crimes of the communist regimes against the human, social and cultural rights of the Roma. The situation in the USSR in the early 1920s and 1930s, however, shows very different starting positions on that matter by the Soviet state and Roma activists. For Roma activists the topic of the sedentarisation of the Roma nomads was

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a basic one. This was formulated already by the above mentioned Gypsy Komsomol Group, founded in 1923, which sets it as a main aim:

“obligatory fight with nomadism, which serves as the premier obstacle to organizing education and improving their [of the Gypsies] economy”.

In the Draft Statute of the Union of Gypsies living on the territory of the RSFSR supplied for approval in 1924 , in the Article II (Purpose of the Union), § 1, we read following:

“The Union aims to unite and organize the Roma working masses living in the territory of the RSFSR, protect their economic and legal interests, raise the cultural level and organize mutual assistance and transfer the nomads to the industrial and agricultural way of life.”

In the Statute of the Union, which was approved according to the legal requirements on 15 July 1926 by the National Commission of Internal Affairs (НКВД [NKVD]), however, the sentence is worded differently:

“Article II, § 5: The Union has the aim of uniting and organizing the Gypsy working masses living on the territory of the RSFSR, protecting their interests, raising the cultural level and organizing mutual assistance.”

i.e. on the decision of authorities, the request by Roma activists for the transition of nomads to a sedentary lifestyle has faded away and moved from §1 to § 5. The Article III (Methods of Implementation), § 6 (d), was recasted too:

“Union publishes Gypsy-language magazines, newspapers, brochures and textbooks, conducts a moral struggle against public evil among its members, such as: drunkenness, fortune-telling, begging, gambling, nomadism”.

As seen, the sedentarization of the nomads was ousted on the back in the Union's activities, and was limited only to a "moral struggle" with nomadism (and it is ranked last in importance).

This attitude of the Soviet state towards Gypsy nomadism is not accidental. In 1927, the NKVD received a letter from local authorities of Tver' Governorate which contained complaints of “thefts and scams” carried out by Gypsy nomads and sought to limit the “activity of this parasitic element” i.e. it asked for administrative measures against the nomadic way of life. NKVD's reply of 20 September 1927 was categorical and unambiguous:

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“The Central Administrative Department of the NKVD clarifies that compulsory restriction of the Roma 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.”

It sounds incredible, but in this case, namely the NKVD is the guardian of Soviet laws and opposes forced sedentarization, which appalled the Roma activists. Indeed, as will be explained below, the problem with the nomadic lifestyle of Gypsies is the main trump that Roma activists used until the 1960s, when they make their requests to the Soviet authorities, and precisely with the need to combat the nomadism (and its relics), they justify the need for special policies and concrete actions towards Gypsies by the Soviet state. Regarding the specific activity of Roma activists on the issue of the transition of Gypsy nomads to a sedentary lifestyle, their contribution could be not more decisive. As noted repeatedly in the documents of All-Russian Union of Gypsies, the Union was actively involved in the preparation of two Decrees of the Central Executive Committee (ЦИК [TsIK]) and Council of People's Commissars “On Measures to Promote the Transition of Traveling Gypsies to a Labor Sedentary Way of Life” from 1926 and “On the Allotment Land to Gypsies, Passing to the Labor Sedentary Way of Life” from 1928. The first of these decrees “offers”, and the second “obliges” local authorities to provide preferentially, on first place, arable land to the nomadic Gypsies wishing to settle and engage in agriculture, as well as a number of financial apparel and privileges (current loans, interest-free loans, etc.), and the All-Russian Union of the Gypsies through their own authorized places supports this process, resulting in the emergence of Gypsy economic associations (kolkhozes or agricultural communes and artels, or communes of artisans).

Roma activists set off not only the transition of Gypsies to sedentary lifestyles, but they were also pioneers in a number of other public spheres. On 8 June 1925, the newspaper *Izvestia* (a newspaper which expressed the official views of the Soviet Government as published on behalf of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR) published an article on the development of national literatures, and among the peoples who are entitled to education in their own language, were explicitly mentioned the Gypsies. In 1926, again the newspaper *Izvestia*, published an article "On samples of Gypsy alphabet" about created by the Roma activists Nikolai Pankov and Nina Dudarova the first version of Gypsy alphabet and literary language (based on the dialect of *Ruska Roma*). In 1927 a consultative meeting of representatives of the Chief Administration of Science at The People's Commissariat for Education (Наркомпрос [Narkompros]), the Council of National Minorities at the TsIK of the USSR and the All-Russian Union of the Gypsies was held. At this meeting, a decision was made to design a

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Gypsy alphabet on the basis of the Russian alphabet, and a committee was chosen to work on the development of the Gypsy literary [i.e. standard, codified] language. The commission included prof. Michael Seregeevski of Moscow State University), his assistant Tatyana Wenzel, N. Rogozhev as well as representatives of All-Russian Union of Gypsies - Nikolai Pankov and Nina Dudarova. On May 10, 1927 Anatoly Lunacharskiy, who stand at the head of the People's Commissariat for Education (Narkompros) of the RSFSR wrote a letter № 63807 to the All-Russian Union of Gypsies and informed them about decision taken on Gypsy alphabet. This was the first step in the first known official standardization and codification of Romani language conducted through following publications of grammars, school books, teaching materials, etc.. A Commission for Gypsy Studies was set up at the Institute for Methodology of School Activities, with Roma activists participation. This Commission coordinated the Romani language pedagogical and publishing activities and with this process of creating Gypsy schools and publishing Romani language literature started.

Moreover, among the Roma activists in the early USSR emerged also directions that nowadays are particularly popular as “new trends” in current Romani activism.

First of all, this was the issue of the name of the community for official use which shall replace the previously used exonym. This proposal was made by a non-Rom (something not unusual in history of Roma activism, when innovative ideas are offered for the first time by non-Roma), namely by D. S. Savvov, who was employed at the People's Commissariat for Education (Narkompros). In an article published in the Romani language journal ‘Романи зоря’ (Romani zorya [Romani daybreak]) in 1930, he wrote:

Тумэндэ исы пэскиро кхарибэ – “Ром”, история ракирла со рома выгынэ Индиятыр. Авэлас бы мишто тэкхарэспэ “Индо-Ром”, а тэчнахарэнпэ “цыган”. [Tumende isy peskiro kharibe – “Rom”, istoriya rakirila so roma vygyne Indiyatar. Avelas bi moshto tekkharespe “Indo-Rom”, a tehnaqharenpe “tsygan”.] (Саввов, 1930: 9).

[You have your own name – “Rom”, the history tells that Roma come from India. It would be good to call yourselves “Indo-Rom”, but you call yourself “tsygan”.] (for more details see: Marushiakova and Popov 2018)

Among these Roma activists was born also the concept of Anti-tsiganism (Anti-gypsyism) for designation of state policies of structural discrimination that defined the whole history of the Gypsies. This term was invented by Alexander German in 1928, and further developed as a complete concept by Alexander German and Georgiy Lebedev in an article in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* newspaper in

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1929. In 1931 Andrey Taranov too placed as a particularly important task “the war against anti-Gypsyism”.

It was also in the early USSR, when the issue about specific problems of the Roma women was raised and the need to achieve full female equality, both in society and in the community was underlined. The Roma activists defined women’s position in community as “slave” (Grakhovsky, 1926: 2) and the *All Russian Union of Gypsies*, set as one of its aims the need to release women “from the yoke of family and man’s supremacy”. In this spirit, the Romani language journal “Nevo Drom” (New Road) published in 1931 a programme article by Nina Dudarova “Джяла нэви романи джювли” (Dzhyala nevi romani dzhyuvli [The new Romani woman is coming]) (Дударова, 1931: 23-24).

The fact, that after repeated and lengthy inspections conducted because of financial irregularities, the All Russian Union of Gypsies was liquidated in 1928, did not cease the activities and did not alter the social position of the relatively small elite of Roma activists. On the contrary, the leaders of the Union not only have not been convicted of criminal offenses, although such proposals have been made by the investigators, but rejected by the Soviet authorities with explanation that this small elite must be preserved. After the dissolution of the Union most of them received new appointments in the lower levels of the Soviet nomenclature. As a result, their work on the realization of state Gypsy policy has become much more effective than it was at the time of the existence of the All-Russian Union of Gypsies, because they became able to use the powerful Soviet state apparatus. This is evident from the results achieved in selected key areas of Soviet Gypsy policy: the creation of Gypsy kolkhozes and Artels; establishing Gypsy schools (only in Moscow at different times there were 9 such schools); training of teaching staff in the Gypsy Pedagogical Institute, established in 1932 in Moscow; and especially in the publishing of a wide variety of literature in Romani (circa 300 titles, including textbooks and educational materials, agitation literature, poetry, prose and drama by Roma authors, translations of fiction, etc.).

To say in brackets, the Roma elite in the Soviet state turned out to be a unique phenomenon in the context of the massive repression in the USSR in the second half of the 1930s. In these repressions, not only the old national (formed before the October Revolution) elites of the various peoples but also the vast majority of their new communist’s elites were annihilated. Perhaps the only exception in this context was the Roma national elite, which was de facto not affected at all by political repression. In fact, the Gypsies as a peculiar nationality were not target of special repressions in contrast to many others, but only as individual persons.

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In total, the number of Gypsies who are victims of mass repression is not large (little more than 400 people, with about one fourth of them receiving death sentences) at least in comparison with other nationalities, but there is no one Roma activist among them. Among the convicted, there is only one Roma member of the Communist Party (Vladimir Zorin from Ukraine), but he has not been involved in Roma activism. In fact, the only Roma activist sentenced to 10 years in prison was Georgiy Lebedev, the first administrative director of the Theater Romen, but he was accused on an article of the Criminal Code (for financial offenses). More usual was the reverse logic of sentences: the criminal offenses received political accusations (e.g. the theft of horses from the kolkhozes was presented as a revolt against Soviet property and state). Even in cases when Roma activists have fallen into disgrace, their punishment was rather symbolic, e.g. the former President of the All-Russian Union of the Gypsies, Andrey Taranov has been for years editor-in-chief of the Romani journals *Romani Zorya* (Gypsy Dawn) and *Nevo Drom* (New Path); after the liquidation of the Union he was punished on the party line with reprimand (which was recorded in his party card), and in 1934 he was sent to a low rank party post in Kyrgyzstan. In 1937 however he was returned to Moscow and was appointed to Sovnarkhoz (Council of National Economy) as responsible for securing employment for the Gypsies.

The mechanisms by which Roma activists and visionaries strived to influence the main directions within the Soviet Gypsy policy varied. Here we will address only one of them; namely, the popular genre of the time, "Letter to the leader" (Stalin), as a way of achieving particular objectives. This form to address the authorities, was repeating the model of the so-called 'челобитная' (chelobitnaya – a specific kind of Supplication) from Medieval Russia, which was imposed in Soviet society after the pyramid of Communist rule was finally established, and it became clear to all who is the real "supreme leader" of the Soviet state (at that time it was Stalin, the Secretary-General). Although from a formally legal point of view the head of state was Mikhail Kalinin, to whom too many letters were sent, but mainly containing petition for solving personal problems. Addressing the letters to Stalin, not to Kalinin, shows that the Roma activists regarded Gypsy politics as a serious state problem, and therefore sought support and awaited the intervention of the Highest Authority.

We have been able to discover ten of such letters in the archives of Soviet institutions and within private collections, which we will present here. Six of them were addressed to Stalin, one to Petr Pospelov, one to Nikita Khrushchov, and one to Anastas Mikoyan. They were written by individual Roma activists or a group of them at different times (the first one was from 1935 and the last one from 1964).

Unlike many other letters of this genre, the Letters written by Roma activists concern not specific problems, but rather pose general questions of principle about the overall dimensions of Soviet

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Gypsy politics, its main aims and tasks, and the forms and mechanisms of its implementation in respective localities or in specific fields. Thus, these letters once again confirm that Roma activism appears (or at least tried to be) an active factor in the formation and implementation of Gypsy policy in the USSR.

The first letter from the list is from 1935, signed by Trofim Gerasimov, engineer at the Train carriage factory in the town of Zaporozhye-Kamenskoe (part of the Dnipropetrovsk agglomeration). We don't know much about him. Very likely he originated from the Smolensk region and his life path was typical for the new community elite of Roma activists. In his letter he puts it in the following way: "Who was I before? A Gypsy nomad, I wandered with tabor [nomadic camp] from place to place. Then I served [the rich peasants], then the Komsomol, the school, the party and the responsible work on the construction of socialism". Trofim Gerasimov was a Communist Party (VKP(b)) member from 1927. Already in the late 1920s (since he arrived at the training courses for proletarian activists in Moscow), he showed his public commitment to the problems of the Gypsies through a series of letters to various Soviet institutions - to Moscow Committee of the BKII(б), Central Committee of the VKP(b), to All-Union Central Executive Committee (VTSIK), Department of nationalities as well as to NKVD. In Moscow he worked in the management of the Gypsy artel "Red stamp" and then as an instructor in Moscow Regional Land Department (МОЗО [MOZO]). In this his position, in the spring of 1933, he attempted to organize two Gypsy kolkhozes in the Moscow region for the wandering Gypsies, who in the conditions of the severe shortage of food products massively flock to Moscow in search of food. The attempt was not successful, and finally, in the summer of the same year, 5470 Roma people (men, women and children) with all their property (including horses) were deported to Siberia. The rationale for the deportation was that they are "foreign" [i.e/ foreign citizens]. In Siberia they were settled in the so-called 'labor settlement' near the Chikhayul River, in the Tomsk region, but already by the winter of the same year they fled out and continued with their nomadic way of life without being searched for anymore by the authorities.

In his extended letter of 13 printed A4 pages to "Dear leader of the party and the working class, Comrade Stalin" (this was the address used at that time) Trofim Gerasimov adheres to the templates for such documents. At the beginning, he described the Gypsies' achievements under Soviet rule - the creation of Gypsy kolkhozes, Gypsy schools, and so on, all illustrated with examples from the Smolensk region, then part of the Western oblast. In following lines he described the problems facing the Gypsies in the Soviet state. He denounced the reluctance of the Soviet institutions in localities and also of the Moscow Regional Land Department (MOZO) to grant land to the nomads willing to abandon nomadic way of life and to build Gypsy kolkhozes. His criticism was addressed also to the

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Department for nationalities at VTSIK because despite some achievements, it does almost nothing on the Gypsy question, including the fact that it has not resolved the issue of publishing a Gypsy newspaper. After all this, Gerasimov proposed to solve all identified problems through creation of a Gypsy national region which must “grow and become a Gypsy autonomous republic”. In this region nomadic Gypsies should be settled in compact mass, and it should be expected that in this way the Gypsy camps will be liquidated and quoting the author:

“based on the elimination of the Gypsy camp would be liquidated the Gypsy bourgeoisie and kulaks, who exploit the Gypsy workers in the camps, where there is no Party and Soviet eye”.

In fact, here Gerasimov is making use of the famous thesis of Stalin on aggravation of the class struggle along with the development of socialism and applied it to the Gypsy community. The Gypsy nomadic lifestyle was marked as a fruitful environment for the existence of class enemies. The main message of this letter is to show the need to force nomads to settle in order to destroy the possibilities for the existence of exploiting classes among Gypsies. As shown, Trofim Gerasimov was very well oriented in the general socio-political context and purposefully incorporated in its his own visions about the development of the Roma community. Therefore, in his proposal, the expected results from the creation of a Gypsy region were clearly indicated:

“With the organization of the region, which will with grow up with enormous speed into an autonomous Gypsy republic, the army of working Gypsies will become a direct conduit of socialist construction - our first and foremost task.”

The idea of creating a Gypsy territorial unit where the nomads will settle, found in Gerasimov's letter, is neither new nor original. For the first time it was raised by Roma activists a decade before, in the working plan for 1926 of All-Russia Union of Gypsies. It states:

“In order to preserve the evolving national features of the Gypsy masses, and in view of the peculiarities of their way of life, the Union implies: (a) to detach in the South [i.e. in Southern Russia] a territory for settlement of the Gypsies, which will bring together all types of agricultural organizations as well as all Gypsies wishing to settle individually.”

This idea was presented in the public space through the newspaper Komsomolskaya Pravda. In 1930 it published the article by Daniel Savvov and Georgiy Lebedev “*To throw away in the past the*

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nomadism: let's include the Roma in the active construction of socialism". The article calls for a compact (as in the case of the Jews) sedentarisation of the Gypsy nomads.

As can be seen, Trofim Gerasimov letter justified the necessity to create the Gypsy national territorial administrative unit in the same way as it was done by the 1926 working plan of the All-Russian Union of Gypsies. It actually only updated the working plan in the spirit of the time and added new arguments, e.g. that in the new conditions "Gypsy national socialist culture" will quickly develop, as well as the emerging Gypsy national literature, which will reach the community more easily.

It is worth mentioning another interesting touch in the letter of Trofim Gerasimov, reflecting the spirit of the times. After having dealt with the Gypsies, he decided to use the occasion and to say, as he calls it, "some critical remarks" about the work in his factory, and more precisely, in his workshop. In these remarks, he denounced a number of "wreckers" (a widely used term for Soviet enemies) that impeded work in his workshop and hindered socialist construction. What was their further destiny in the subsequent mass repression is not hard to guess.

Trofim Gerasimov's letter to Stalin was forwarded to VTsIK. The head of the Department for Nationalities at VTsIK, Nigmat Nurmakov in an official note to the Secretary of the Council of Nationalities, Alexander Khatskevich, expressed sharply his attitude to the letter:

"...A great deal of work has been done in regard to the accommodation of the Gypsy issues in the last 2-3 years; this work was done by local Soviet and party organs with day-to-day control and leadership of the All-Union Central Executive Committee without any participation from Gerasimov and others like him, who limit their care for Gypsies to writing annually such notes. Accommodating Gypsies is not an easy thing, it does not require urgent measures, but persistent and patient work ... that is what we are doing all the time ... As for the creation of the Gypsy Republic, I consider this question to be idle at this time, so I do not intend to deal with."

As will be seen later, however, the issue of creating a Gypsy republic was not abandoned and the position of the Department of nationality will soon radically change.

The next chronologically letter to Stalin is from the children of the boarding school in the town of Smolensk, Western region, from January 2, 1936. It has a form of standard thank-you-letters, but in it one can find also important hints to the policy of the Soviet state towards Gypsies:

"We, the alumni of the Gypsy children's home with school, pass our proletarian salutation to our wise and great, and best educator, and chairman of all working people, Comrade Stalin! .. earlier we were homeless and led a nomadic lifestyle ... [Listed are the problems encountered by setting up the children's home] ... but

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under the correct Leninist-Stalinist national policy under your clever leadership, we, the earlier oppressed and backward nation, we have ... [listed are the successes] ... we send to you, Comrade Stalin !!!, a heartfelt gratitude for turning us into useful, conscious builders of the classless socialist society”.

Quite similar as a message is another letter to Stalin, published the same year in the journal *Revolution and Natsionalynosti* (...) published by the Council of Nationalities of ВЦИК. This letter is presented as sent from the Gypsy kolkhoz “Nevi Bakht” (New Luck). The letter itself is written in a very well-trained, propaganda public language, and repeats all the propaganda clichés in the Soviet print regarding the Gypsies, including in the speeches of individual members of the kolkhoz. The letter is an obvious counterfeit and this is evident not only from its emotionally stilted style and fake text, but is also confirmed by additional check. The archives contain many materials for the kolkhoz Nevi Bakht, in the Bisarki village council, Sarapulski district of the Sverdlovsk region (now Yekaterinburg region). However, the sources neither mention the visiting journalists from Moscow, nor the family names of Roma cited in the letter. Moreover, all the Gypsy family names pointed in the letter are Ukrainian, Such names are found only among Gypsy groups of Servi and Vlaxi who lived at that time only in Ukraine and southern Russia. To the contrary the family names reflected in the archival sources of this kolkhoz are typical for the members of the Ruska Roma group.

The next letter to Stalin, which will be presented here, is particularly important because it marks the beginning of new interesting developments in the vision of Roma activists about the future of their community and lead to important implications for the Gypsy policy in the USSR. The letter, dated January 4, 1936, was written on behalf of the delegates of the cultural and economic service meeting of the working Gypsies in the Western Region (Smolensk), attended by delegates from other areas as well. The letter is addressed to “the great teacher, genius leader of the working people around the world, the Great Leader of our Communist Party VKP(b) Comrade Stalin!”. It is signed by Ilya Gerasimov (instructor in the Regional Executive Committee), N. Mikholazhin (director of a Gypsy elementary school with a children's home) and R. Gorbunov (chairman of the Gypsy kolkhoz October). The letter starts with the usual trapharet words:

“...thanks to the correct Leninist-Stalin national policy, part of our nation, the most forgotten, the most uncultivated, the most oppressed at the time of the Tzarism, now managed to join equally with all the working people in the USSR in the construction of socialism and build their happy, a joyful and wealthy new life.”

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After listing successes in kolkhoz work in the Western Region and the creation of Gypsy schools, the most important message follows:

“...Dear Comrade Stalin! We still have many shortcomings which hinder the more rapid transition of nomadic peoples to sedentary lifestyle. Our kolkhozes cannot expand at the expense of those kolkhozes around us (i.e. the letter pointed to shortage of land), so we have to refuse admission to the kolkhozes to so many nomads, and so part of Gypsies still stay nomadic and beg. We are praying on behalf of the Gypsies to allocate for us a territory, at least as an area, for the compact settlement of the working Gypsies. Among us there are many Gypsy communists, Comsomol members, students youngster and many professionals that grew among the Gypsies, who could ensure the leadership of the given territory.”

The main driver of the idea of creating a separate Gypsy national unit that will gradually become a Gypsy autonomous republic is Ilya Gerasimov (probably a relative of Trofim Gerasimov, who was mentioned above). He was born in the Smolensk region, in a family of settled Roma. He failed to get a good education, but in the conditions of the Soviet state, which creates powerful social elevators for the representatives of the so-called oppressed classes and strata, to which the Gypsies belonged, he managed to make a career of party worker in the lower layers of the Soviet nomenclature. He was head of Gypsy kolkhozes *Рабочий путь* (Rabochyĭ put' [Working road]) and *Октябрь* (Oktyabr [October]), the latter managed to become a leader in the region, created a Gypsy boarding school, and in 1936 he reached a leading position in the Regional Executive Committee of the Western Region, with its center in the town of Smolensk. The letter to Stalin is not the first initiative of Ilya Gerasimov for the establishment of a Gypsy administrative territorial unit. As early as November 1934, he sent a letter to the Chairman of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR, Mikhail Kalinin (Formally the Head of the Soviet State), in which he wrote:

“... I ask you to put the question of accommodation of Gypsies in context of allocating a special Gypsy territory in form of region”.

His letter was not taken into account then, but in 1936 the situation changed. The Jewish Autonomous Region in Far East became an already established fact, i.e. it formed a precedent for establishing an administrative territorial unit of a nationality that previously lived dispersed, without its own territory, as was the case of Gypsies too. In 1935 in Moscow, in the position of a secretary of the Council of Nationalities at the TsIK USSR was employed Alexander Khatskevich, on whose initiative on 4-5

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January 1936 a special meeting on the issues of securing occupation for the Gypsy nomads and for supplying them with cultural and economic services was convened. The meeting was of an extremely wide format, attended by representatives of all state institutions involved in some way with the policy towards the Gypsies and all Roma activists, including the presidents of Gypsy kolkhozes from the country (with only one exception of the former chair of All Russian Gypsy Union, who at that time had fallen into disgrace and was sent to a low level party job in Kyrgyzstan). In his introduction Alexander Khatskevich clearly expresses the position of Soviet authorities:

“it is necessary to welcome the actions of the RSFSR government to create a territorial Gypsy area”.

All present supported this line, including Ilya Gerasimov, who only a few days earlier sent his letter to Stalin. From the speeches (and especially from Khatskevich's final speech), it turns out that the apparatus of the National Minorities Department at VTsIK has already initiated the first steps in that direction. In July 1933 the Department of National Minorities in VTsIK, with the active assistance of a member of this Department, the Roma activist Ivan Tokmakov, sent the famous Roma activist Maxim Bezlyudskiy to the village of Kangly, near the town Mineralnye Vody in Northern Caucasus, with task to lead the Gypsy kolkhoz *Труд Ромэн* (Trud Romen [Gypsy work]). In 1934 Bezlyudskiy was elected chairman of the first Gypsy national rural council, and under his leadership the Gypsy kolkhoz quickly developed; moreover, with the active assistance of Soviet institutions and the press, in the public sphere this kolkhoz was actively promoted as a model example for all nomadic Gypsies.

In 1935, the All-Union Resettlement Committee at the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR, together with the People's Commissariat for Agriculture, made inquiries to all the districts, regions and autonomous republics asking whether they are able to provide land for the settlement of Gypsy nomads and for the creation of a Gypsy Territorial Region. Numerous responses to this query were received. The North Caucasus Region (on the territory of which was the Gypsy kolkhoz ‘Trud Romen’, that was envisaged to be the future center of the Gypsy autonomous region), the Azov-Black Sea Region and the Crimean ASSR, refused categorically to accept a Gypsy region on their territory, arguing with a lack of free lands. Positive responses were received from Gorkovsky Krai (now Nizhny Novgorod), who offered free land in the Mari Region (today Mari Autonomous Region), which offered unused forest areas and from the Omsk region, which offered free forestland further north in the Ostyak–Vogul National Okrug (now the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug – Yugra). These proposals have been judged as inappropriate due to natural and climatic conditions, and as the most feasible appeared the proposal from the West-Siberian Krai with its center in Novosibirsk, which offered free

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land for the settlement of Gypsies on the territory of today's Altai. This consent was linked to a request for additional investment in the region's budget needed for new research expedition, which enable to assess whether these conditions will allow the creation of a viable Gypsy national region.

As can be seen, a work on the creation of the Gypsy Territorial Autonomous Unit was ongoing without being widely advertised. According to unpublished essay written by Nikolai Pankov, the credit for this is primarily of Ivan Tokmakov, who, according Pankov, was a “Gypsy by father and mother”, born in Yekaterinburg. At that time, Ivan Tokmakov was an instructor in the Department of nationalities at VTsIK, and was able to use the mechanisms of managerial apparatus for conducting of tasks identified by Roma activists.

After the general meeting in early 1936, discussed above, the idea of creating a Gypsy territorial-administrative unit gradually became popular also within the public domain. In the same year there was a massive public discussion on the draft of a new Soviet constitution. On this occasion, in July the newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* [...], published numerous notes and queries from readers. One of the notes received by a group of citizens from Moscow was a proposal to create in the composition of the RSFSR or of the Ukrainian SSR a Gypsy Autonomous Region, which will unite the dispersed Gypsy kolkhozes and will facilitate the transition of Gypsies towards a settled way of life, and their cultural revival. One week later in the same newspaper another note was published, according to which the Gypsy activists from the central Gypsy club in Moscow, together with authorized representatives of the newly created the Gypsy Kolkhoz in Kharkov, discussed the suggestion made in the newspaper, and supported it by believing the creation of a Gypsy autonomous region will help the fastest settlements of the Gypsy nomads.

Ilya Gerasimov, in his turn, continued to push with his letters to the Soviet institutions the idea of creating a Gypsy administrative-territorial unit. In a letter to the Constitutional Commission headed by Stalin, which prepared the text of the new Soviet Constitution (the so-called Constitution of victorious socialism), Gerasimov wrote:

“The nomadic population asks the Constitutional Commission headed by Joseph Stalin and the Government to allocate an area in the Union for the compact settlement of Gypsies ... now zeal for sedentarisation is particularly strong. ... the Gypsy population throughout the Union is more than 100,000, among them are many communists, Komsomol members who can assist the Soviet party organizations in the management of the area.”

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A few words about the further developments in regard the creation of Gypsy administrative territorial unit. In his autobiography, Andrei Taranov wrote that, in connection with the creation of a Gypsy region in 1937, he was withdrawn from Kyrgyzstan and directed to work at the Resettlement Committee at the Council of People's Agriculture. According to him, the implementation of the initiative was hindered by the war and here he adds in Romanes "te vavres" [and other issues] (i.e. apparently there are things he does not want to talk about). Indeed, the reasons for not being able to implement the plans for the of a Gypsy territorial-administrative unit (and, in the future, a Gypsy Autonomous Republic) are many and varied, and the beginning of World War II is only the final and decisive one. By the end of the 1930s, the Soviet economy as a whole was re-structured on military rails in view of the upcoming war and the main investments went in this direction, which greatly reduced the possibilities for financing other activities, including creating a Gypsy territorial unit. All-Union the Resettlement Committee was transferred to the custody of the NKVD, which at that time was engaged with other activities considered more important (including with the transformation of the Gulag system). As a whole, as evidenced by the numerous sources, NKVD representatives have always been more reserved about plans to create a Gypsy national area and, without rejecting the idea itself, always called for a slower pace of realization and - for limited activities. Mass repression in the second half of 1930 reflected on the system of VTsIK, where all employed at senior positions in the Council of Nationalities and the Department of nationalities who were engaged in work with Gypsies, were arrested and killed (or died in the camps). In 1938 the VTsIK was disbanded, its activities were taken over by the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, and so the main engine of the idea of creating a Gypsy national territorial-administrative unit was dropped. In spite of all of this, the work in this direction continued, but the absence of the main coordinating body slowed down the processes. The beginning of World War II and especially the attack on the USSR in 1941 finally put an end to the project, which might have lead to the creation of a Gypsy autonomous republic.

In 1938 an important event took place, which particularly strongly reflected on the Soviet Gypsy policy and the issue of Roma activism. A reorganization of the Narkompros started, and on January 24, 1938 a Note was issued (in fact a closed, non-public decree) of the TsK VKP (b) "On the liquidation of national schools and national sections in the schools". The note prescribed the closure of 18 national departments in the education system, as well as the existing schools of 16 individual nationalities. In the list were included nations without their own territorial-administrative formations and those living outside of them - e.g. Armenians living outside Armenian USSR, Poles, Germans, etc., ending with Kurds, Assyrians and on the last place the Gypsies. Understandably, this note was not directed against the Gypsies and did not imply a radical change of Soviet Gypsy politics, but in

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practice it led to the closure of Gypsy schools and classes, as well as a Gypsy pedagogical school where teachers were trained, as well as the closure of national chapters in major Soviet publishers, resulting in the ceasing of mass publishing in Romani. All of this naturally reflects very strongly on the Roma activists and thus in February 1938 the next letter to Stalin was written by Nikolay Pankov, which we will present now. The original letter was not found in the archives yet, but the author's personal archive has stored the handwritten original.

Nikolay Pankov's letter is significantly different from the above quoted letters to Stalin. It begins with the problems, or as Pankov himself writes:

“There are several alarming moments in the resolution on the fate of the Gypsy people, which, as a son of a socialist fatherland and as a Gypsy, cannot but worry me and make me look for the answer to the questions”.

A listing of these problems follows: about the Gypsy kolkhozes, where there is not always the possibility to accommodate the nomadic Gypsies; about the lack of free land, where the nomads could establish their new kolkhozes, which is linked to the lack of a Gypsy newspaper which, through its commitment to Soviet institutions, can support the process of sedentarisation; about Gypsy Roma Theater, which, according to Pankov, has degenerated into an exotic theater instead of serving the Gypsy working masses and educating the Gypsy nation; about the lack of a comprehensive system for the preparation and education of Gypsy cadres; about the closure of Gypsy schools and the re-direction of children into the general education system which cannot successfully manage their education because is not familiar with their “temper, habits and customs”; about ceasing the publication of literature in Gypsy language, as an example the difficulties with publishing the “Gypsy-Russian Dictionary” by Prof. Mihail Sergievsky and Prof. Alexey Barannikov are mentioned (in the preparation of which Pankov himself was actively involved and which inspite of pointed difficulties was published). Finally, it mentioned that elections for the Supreme Council (the Soviet Parliament) are forthcoming, but because of their dispersal in different places, the Gypsies will be unable to raise their deputies.

The author of this letter, Nikolay Pankov, is a famous Roma activist, one of the initiators and founders of the Romani language alphabet, author of a number of textbooks for Gypsy schools, author of poetry and prose in Romani language, lecturer at the Gypsy Pedagogical Technical School, member of the Union of Soviet writers and even member of the Gypsy Lore Society. His daughter remembered, that after sending the letter, he was expecting to be arrested, but nothing happened, and only after three years he was visited by NKVD officials who told him:

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“Comrade Stalin read your letter, he thanks you, be calm, he will address you again”.

This happened shortly before Germany attacked the USSR, and of course nothing followed in regard to the Soviet Gypsy policy.

Again, according to the memories of his daughter, Nikolay Pankov wrote also a second letter to Stalin after the end of the war, raising the issue of stagnation in Gypsy culture and education but did not receive a reply. Such a letter was not discovered, and it is unclear whether there is no confusion with Pankov's letter to the Soviet leadership in the 1950s, which will be discussed below.

The last letter to Stalin, which we are presenting here, is from May 4, 1946. It is entitled “Collective letter from representatives of Soviet Gypsies to JV Stalin” and signed by 11 people, led by one of the first Roma activists Ivan Rom-Lebedev, who at that time had a leading position in Theater Roma. Among these 11 people were Roma members and candidate members of the VKP(b), and Roma personalities on publicly significant positions. The letter begins:

“Dearest and Beloved Joseph Vissarionovich! We appeal to you as a first deputy from the Supreme Council, as a leader, teacher and friend of the big and small peoples of the Soviet Union.”

Follows a description of what the Soviet state has done for Gypsies (kolhozes, schools, alphabets, literature, theater, etc.), and summarized:

“All these achievements are the result of your attention to all the fraternal peoples of your daily care for the working man”.

The letter draws attention to the participation of the Gypsies in the just finished WWII:

“... In the years of the Great Patriotic War the Soviet Gypsies fought alongside the brotherly nations hand by hand, in the ranks of the Red Army and partisan detachments. For the first time in world history, the Soviet Gypsies turned out to be true heroes. Without sparing their lives, they unrestrainedly defended their only homeland. Many of the Gypsy fighters received with high battle awards from the Soviet government.”

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These lines sound lofty and overly-enthusiastic', but they nevertheless reflect the real state of affairs, which is confirmed by the latest research (especially by the last fundamental work of Nikolay Bessonov) on the participation of Gypsies in the war.

The letter highlights the problems faced by the Gypsies in their transition to a peaceful life:

“... in localities the peculiarities of the Gypsy nationality are not taken in account... the special measures of the Party and Government for assistance to the Gypsies in their employment are not taken in account... literature in the native language of Gypsies is not published and cultural-enlightening work among the backward Gypsies is suspended ... The Gypsy families in need return to wandering.”

At the end of the letter was worded a proposal made by the Roma activists, who signed the letter, which they believed will help overcome the existing problems:

“Dear Joseph Vissarionovich!

Now, when the whole country, with unprecedented enthusiasm, once again embarks the restoration and development of the national economy, we, representatives of the advanced part of the Roma population, appeal to you with the request to establish a Gypsy cultural representation in the Council of Nationalities, that would raise all vital issues to relevant organizations, concerned with work among Gypsies and would monitor and ensure that these issues are timely and adequately resolved. We are confident that the Gypsy representation which would be entrusted with the care of Soviet employment of the Gypsies, with raising their cultural level, the flowering of authentic Gypsy art, will put an end to lack of personal responsibility in solving the Gypsies issue and will give positive results in attracting Gypsies to a socialist society.”

The desire of Roma activists to return to prewar pro-Gypsy policy in its various social and cultural dimensions is understandable. Not without reason, they see the particular importance of a coordinating center for the development of this policy. In the 1930s, such coordinating role, assisting the various Soviet institutions at a national and local level, was played by one personality, namely by Ivan Tokmakov in his capacity of instructor at the apparatus of the Department of Nationalities of VTsIK. After Germany's assault on the Soviet Union in 1941, although of age (almost 60 years) and in the position of a Soviet employee, which meant he was not subject to mobilization, he nevertheless volunteered for the Red Army, went to the front and died in 1942.

No documentary evidence has been found that these letters have had any consequence.

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In all the letters to Stalin, there is no handwritten resolution of Stalin confirming that he personally read them. As a matter of practice such kind of letters were referred to the relevant institutions by the Secretariat of Stalin, with an instruction to react and to undertake the necessary measures.

It is interesting to note that there is no mention of the Gypsies in Stalin's enormous written heritage. As it is well known, throughout his life Stalin wrote an impressive amount of texts, notes and resolutions on a variety of issues, including many of them dedicated to the problems of nations and nationalities, but the Gypsy topic was never within the reach of his attention.

A question could be posed why Stalin neglected the Gypsy issue. To understand this as well as the overall Soviet policy towards the Gypsies at that time (and in general too), a very important factor, which is often overlooked, must be taken into account when assessing it. Unlike the other countries in Central and Southeastern Europe, where Roma have a significant share of the population (most often on second or third highest number in respective countries), the situation in the USSR is quite different. According to the Population Census conducted in the interwar period, in 1926 the Gypsies occupy 45th place among the other Soviet nationalities, and in 1939 the 43rd place (which is much less than 1% of the total population). It is quite understandable that the Gypsy theme is too far off on the periphery of state national policy at that time. At the same time, some well-established public attitudes towards Gypsies should be taken into account. About this wrote very accurately Ivan Rom-Lebedev in a note to the Secretary of ЦИК Avel Enkukidze in 1927, when the liquidation of the All-Russian Union of Gypsies was discussed:

“The main and most insulting facts which hinders its [of the Union] activity were the mistrust of the Soviet and Party organs, which were ironic and distrustful of our endeavors”.

This disparaging attitude towards the “Gypsy theme” is also an important factor, along with the objective realities (the post-war destruction, and the need to overcome it), which explains also why the last letter addressed to Stalin had no consequences.

In the postwar Soviet Union actually no governmental decision to change the Gypsy policy was taken, but due to lack of activities this policy de facto ceased. Without special support publications in Romani were limited, most of the existing Gypsy kolkhozes were on the territory occupied by the German Army, and were destroyed by the invaders, and never re-established. Kolkhozes in other places (as well as the other existing national kolkhozes) after the war, following the general policy for consolidation of the kolkhozes merged into bigger units. The longest persisted Gypsy national village council was in the village Kangly, near Mineralnye vody, which was officially closed as late as 1952,

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although after the war, no Roma have remained in the village (the area was occupied by the German army and the Gypsies who survived fled from there).

The lack of any consequences from the last letter to Stalin did not finally despair the Romani elite, formed in the 1920s and 1930s, and did not harm the belief (at least of some of them) that it is possible through writing letters to the very the top of the Soviet hierarchy to achieve a resumption of the previous pro-Gypsy state policy even after Stalin's death.

On June 12, 1953, several months after the death of Stalin, Nikolay Pankov sent a new letter, this time to Petr Pospelov who was the secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (the Communist Party changed its name in 1952), in which he asked for a resumption of the pre-war state policy towards them – recovery of Gypsy kolkhozes and Artels; of Gypsy schools and publications in Romani language. Despite the conversations held in the apparatus of the Central Committee of the CPSU were held, concrete results did not follow. Frustrated by a lack of response, on March 14, 1956, 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 Roma on the transition to a settled way of life, employment and culture”.

Unlike Pankov's previous letters, it seems as though this letter had a substantial result, and it was very quick - On the 5th October 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 not impossible that Soviet authorities alone have reached this solution (in any case, there are no historical evidences of how this Decree was being prepared). 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 nomadic way of life of the Gypsies. However, the practice shows that 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 Roma elite of its main argument (the need to fight the nomadic way of life), which they have constantly used in trying to convince the

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authorities of the need for pro-Gypsy politics to be more active from the early days of the USSR until the Decree was issued.

The endpoint of all these attempts was put in the letter of Nikolay Satkevich, entitled “Gypsy problem in the Soviet Union”, written in 1964, to Anastas Mikoyan, President of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. The author, Nikolai Satkevich, is the last representative of the cohort of Roma activists from the prewar period, graduate of the Gypsy Pedagogical Technical School, war hero with many military awards. In his letter, he described the entire Soviet state's experience of working with Gypsies, the successes achieved and the remaining problems, and proposed to create special boarding schools where Gypsy children will be trained. Unlike the case with all other letters, the answer now was quick and unambiguous:

“In a letter to comrade A. I. Mikoyan, teacher N. N. Satkevich raises the question of improving the labor education of people of Gypsy nationality by creating special boarding schools for children, schools for youth and artels for adults. The experience of creating a special class of Roma children in secondary school № 56 in Irkutsk, which is referred to by comrade Satkevich, has not justified itself... Parents spoke in favor of educating their children in general education schools by place of residence.”

Memories of contemporaries also confirm that Satkevich's attempts to establish such special boarding schools have been met with strong resistance in the community, especially on the part of Roma women who have accused him publicly of wanting to take away their children. This led to a situation in which the Roma community rejected the ideas of its own elite and made this elite meaningless because community representatives whose ideas are not supported by their community cannot be defined as an elite. This was actually an 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 an unequal positions, with one of them (Soviet authorities) being the leading and determining, and the other (the Roma elite) depending. Whether contemporary Roma activists will be able to draw the necessary lessons from the experience of the past is a question the answer to which is yet to be seen.