

International House NY
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WESEUM
Bulgaria

Project Proposal

- *Description*

The proposed project seeks to counteract the harassment, violence, discrimination and exclusion towards the largest minority group in Bulgaria, the Roma. The project will build understanding and break down barriers through creating, launching, and vastly popularizing a community-curated pop-up museum.

Bulgaria is among the EU countries with the largest share of Roma within the overall population (over 10%). According to recent studies, over 70% of Roma in Bulgaria say they face discrimination in housing, education, employment and health. Not only that, over 75% of the Roma population currently live in segregated neighborhoods. More than ever before, in 2018, 81% of Bulgarians, who have witnessed hate speech, say it was directed towards Roma. Over 30% of Roma say that they have been harassed. The lack of progress with regard to Roma integration and the rise of anti-Roma sentiment makes this a major point of division and clashes in the country.

Due to increasing hostility, over the years initially local incidents between Roma and non-Roma people in Bulgaria have sparked major regional and national protests, feeding on existing and unresolved tension. These protests usually quickly turn violent and require considerable police intervention, leading to local government officials and politicians to introduce populist measures to appease the majority non-Roma population. Such measures include forcible evictions of Roma people from their only homes, which only serves to deepen the divide between the two communities.

Incidents are often further exacerbated by politicians and the media, which are quick to report the ethnicity of perpetrators in cases involving Roma people, bolstering in this way perceptions that the Roma community is prone to criminality, and is a burden on the social care system. The widespread negative stereotypes are so loud and divisive that they completely muffle any Roma voices and distort society's perception of the Roma community's identity.

The goal of the project proposal is to create and implement the pilot edition of WESEUM, a global series of pop-up museums curated by different communities across the world. WESEUM is a unique and innovative concept – a space that empowers communities to own their narratives and rise above the stereotypization and misrepresentation, through exhibiting the everyday objects/artefacts/mementos they feel best represent their stories and selves, in this way fostering empathy, promoting a common humanity, and becoming a solid building block for peace.

- *Proposed activities*

The proposed activities include the overall creation and vast popularization of the pilot edition of WESEUM, a global series of community-curated pop-up museums designed to build understanding and break down barriers for groups that are stigmatized, oppressed, and often denied their humanity.

The first WESEUM will be curated by one of the largest Roma communities in Bulgaria, situated in the country's capital, Sofia. Bulgarian designers and architects will create and produce the dismountable, reusable pop-up space, and the Roma community will contribute with up to 50 everyday objects/artefacts/mementos that they feel best represent their stories and selves, to be exhibited inside the museum. Members of the community will be asked to bring two objects that best answer the questions – “What makes you happy? What makes you sad?” These could be any items - showcasing a shared humanity (children's toys, family photos, etc.), or underlining the existing fault lines (brick of

recently demolished house, etc.). By fostering this process of co-creation, we will facilitate an exchange of ideas and experiences that chip away at the decades of barriers put up between the two communities.

The project will feature an array of activities, including establishing partnerships with local Roma leaders, setting up coordinating teams in the neighborhoods, gathering the objects for the exhibition, designing and producing the physical pop-up space, organizing a launch event, engaging in photo and video documentation, setting up media partnerships, carrying out extensive media and social media work, building a website for the project.

- ***Results/goals***

The short-term results include empowering the Roma community to own their narratives and rise above the stereotypization and misrepresentation. The project will counteract the progressive dehumanization of Roma, tackle existing labels and narratives, and in this way foster empathy, promote a common humanity, and become a solid building block for peace. It will examine how tolerance, compassion and action can be elicited through creative collaborations. By putting Roma people at the center in an innovative and inclusive way, it will allow them to curate their own stories and build bridges between communities. The project will promote convergence and understanding by providing an extraordinary space and a meeting point to rethink stereotypes.

The long-term goal is for WESEUM to be a global series of pop-up museums, curated by various closed or marginalized communities (e.g. prisoners, indigenous groups, LGBTQ people) or subculture groups. We are confident that we have the network and skills to be able to implement the series across the world, and gain global visibility and impact (see Capacity below).

- ***Indicators of success***

The quantitative indicators are number of participants (at least 25 people); number of attendees - at least 500 people; number of website visits - at least 10 000; media publications - at least 20. The qualitative indicators are: level of satisfaction of participants (through survey); level of satisfaction of attendees (through survey); positive media representation of the group (media monitoring); change of negative attitudes (series of interviews, one year later).

- ***Capacity***

I am to implement the proposed project with the organisation I co-founded in 2015, Fine Acts Foundation. Fine Acts is a global platform for socially engaged creative solutions. Our mission is to connect artists and civil society activists to work on joint projects in the field of art that communicate and promote the protection of human rights and incite a change in public attitudes towards human rights.

Through our programs so far, we have inspired a number of prominent artists to work on human rights issues, in this way raising awareness and triggering participation and action; given activists new tools and ideas how to better fight for human rights advancement and protection; and boosted innovation in the field, through developing programs on the intersection of human rights, art and technology.

Our track record of accomplished projects (fineacts.co) shows our capacity to execute the project. Fine Acts' work has so far been vastly acknowledged and appreciated by both local and international organizations. We have been invited to give talks about our work at global forums such as TED and the United Nations. Our work has been covered by media outlets such as The Guardian, Metro, Teen Vogue, Mashable, Vice, Fast Company, amongst others. With my work at Fine Acts, I have been selected as 2018-2019 Obama Scholar in Columbia University.