
The Guiding Principles for Safe Havens for Archives at Risk (2018) Put into Practice in a Hungarian Private Archive: Rescuing Public Collections and Collections of Wide Public Relevance at the Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives at Central European University

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Abstract

On October 10, 2019, Hungarian civil rights activist Aladár Horváth alerted the Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives at Central European University (Blinken OSA) to rescue 78 movers' boxes worth of records of the Hungarian Roma Parliament Association (Roma Parliament). The papers, photographs, VHS and audio tapes documenting the proceedings of the Roma Parliament, as well as its library and six desktop computers used by staff, were stored in a wet basement following the organization's eviction from its headquarters a few years earlier. Now the municipality ordered the eviction from the basement storage as well. The records of this umbrella organization for grassroots Roma movements in Hungary were in acute danger of being destroyed, and permanently lost.

Since its establishment in 1992, the Roma Parliament's legal clinic documented hundreds of cases of ethnic and racial discrimination, as well as other atrocities like hate crimes committed against Roma in Hungary. In fact, the eviction of the Roma Parliament from its offices was the finale of years of subtle harrassment at the hands of government and local authorities. Roma politics and society were now organized by, and around, top-down Roma structures lavishly funded by-and loyal to-the government. No public archival institution signaled interest in the records of the organization.

To some, the idea that the records of an entity like the Roma Parliament may not meet the threshold of archiving in a Hungarian public archival institution, may have seemed remote back in 2016, when Blinken OSA participated in the expert working meeting on Safe Havens for Archives at Risk held in Bern, Switzerland. But that is no longer so. Worse yet, in recent years, Blinken OSA has granted, sometimes in a last-minute effort, sanctuary to materials *withdrawn* from public archival institutions by their concerned owners shortly before those public institutions were "reorganized" (in fact, politically streamlined) by the Hungarian government. On at least one occasion, an archival institution was closed (and access to its holdings barred indefinitely), shortly after Blinken OSA saved a portion of this collection upon the request of the owner of the records in question. Having acquired expertise in adopting collections abandoned by public archival institutions, in June 2021 Blinken

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OSA organized a series of panels on endangered public collections with the participation of current and former archival, museum and library workers.

The proposed paper seeks to introduce the work of Blinken OSA in an environment where the public/private divide among archival repositories is ever more complex, and fluid: while some records of wide public relevance have no chance of entering public archival institutions and end up in a private archive with relatively moderate means, other materials are surreptitiously withdrawn by their owners from newly streamlined or imminently closing public archival institutions, and deposited at Blinken OSA. Emphasis will be placed on the many *opportunities* arising for Blinken OSA in this situation, while some of the new challenges (i.e. the temporality of safe haven, ownership, recataloging, open access and access to sensitive information) will also be addressed. The implications of the unusual situation of Blinken OSA as part of Central European University (until recently Hungary's top-ranked graduate university), which was itself forced out of Hungary in 2019, will also be dealt with in the paper.

Keywords: public archives, private archives, archives at risk, open access, government control, archival autonomy