

# Open Society Institute

2008  
Selected Stories



# OSI

**The Open Society Institute works to build vibrant and tolerant democracies whose governments are accountable to their citizens.**

**Open societies are characterized by the rule of law; respect for human rights, minorities, and a diversity of opinions; democratically elected governments; market economies in which business and government are separate; and a civil society that helps keep government power in check.**

To achieve its mission, OSI seeks to shape public policies that assure greater fairness in political, legal, and economic systems and safeguard fundamental rights. On a local level, OSI implements a range of initiatives to advance justice, education, public health, and independent media. At the same time, OSI builds alliances across borders and continents on issues such as corruption and freedom of information. OSI places a high priority on protecting and improving the lives of people in marginalized communities.

Investor and philanthropist George Soros in 1993 created OSI as a private operating and grantmaking foundation to support his foundations in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Those foundations were established, starting in 1984, to help countries make the transition from communism. OSI has expanded the activities of the Soros foundations network to encompass the United States and more than 60 countries in Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Each Soros foundation relies on the expertise of boards composed of eminent citizens who determine individual agendas based on local priorities.

OSI and the Soros foundations network in 2008 spent over \$500 million on programs around the world. Over the past 25 years, the network has given away nearly \$7 billion to build open, democratic societies.

## *2008 Priorities*

OSI's priorities in 2008 included advancing international justice and strengthening domestic justice systems, monitoring and supporting reforms in public health, advocating for transparency and the fair distribution of natural resource riches, improving the lives and securing the human rights of the Roma, and protecting the rights of other marginalized groups such as the developmentally disabled and injecting drug users.

OSI provided funding for numerous efforts to guarantee free and fair elections, including the documentation of human rights violations in the aftermath of Kenya's presidential election and the monitoring of voter registration irregularities in Mongolia, as well as the registration of new voters in the United States.

Among the many justice issues that concern OSI is the use of illegal detention and torture by the United States and other countries. Legal cases supported by OSI resulted in rulings allowing Guantánamo Bay detainees to petition U.S. courts for their release and prisoners in Kazakhstan to protest abusive conditions.

In public health, OSI continued to lead the effort to include human rights protections in the implementation of national and regional HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment efforts. As a result of OSI's efforts, the governments of Macedonia and Moldova took steps to end the

**exclusion of people with intellectual disabilities, and Armenia approved methadone treatment for intravenous drug users.**

**To improve conditions for the Roma, OSI and the Soros foundations worked to restore electricity to a Roma community, change attitudes toward the Roma through films and photography, and advocate for equal access to services.**

**In education, OSI and the Soros foundations have supported early childhood and debate programs as well as higher education reform. One reform effort in 2008 resulted in the adoption by Ukraine of an independent university admissions test that helps reduce corruption in the admissions process.**

**OSI's work in 2008 also covered information, media, women's issues, local government services, economic and business development, and arts and culture.**

**On the following pages are a few selected stories from 2008. Some stories are about the efforts of OSI's grantees. Other stories are about larger issues and policies OSI is trying to improve. Together these accounts represent just a small fraction of the work OSI and the Soros foundations accomplished in 2008. For a more complete picture of OSI's activities, see OSI's website at [www.soros.org](http://www.soros.org).**





# democracy and transparency



## **OSI Grantees Help Increase Voter Participation in U.S. Election**

Over 20 OSI grantees registered more than 1.5 million new and updated voters nationwide before the U.S. presidential election. OSI emphasized support for community-based nonprofit organizations that enfranchised and inspired new voters such as young people, people of color, and new citizens from Arab-American, Asian, and Latino communities. Voter turnout among 18- to 29-year-olds was the highest it has been in more than 35 years.

## **OSI Helps Lead Kenya Past Election Fraud and Political Violence**

OSI responded to Kenya's fraudulent presidential elections in December 2007 and the violence that followed by supporting initiatives to mediate solutions and pursue justice and reconciliation. With support from the Open Society Initiative for East Africa, the Kenyans for Peace with Truth and Justice (KPTJ) coalition gathered evidence to document human rights violations. KPTJ appeals to Europe, the United States, and the African Union (AU) helped the development of the AU mediation process that brought an end to the violence. KPTJ also helped advance witness protection arrangements, inclusion of excluded groups in the mediation process, compensation for victims of violence, resettlement of internally displaced persons, and constitutional reform.

## **Voter Registration Irregularities Exposed in Mongolia**

The first monitoring efforts in the history of Mongolian elections revealed that out of some 47,000 voters analyzed, only 15,000 were actually eligible voters whose residential address matched their assigned polling station. The Open Society Forum, supported by OSI, worked with a local NGO partner to analyze the accuracy of voter rolls that the government had long kept secret. The monitoring showed thousands of voters registered at old or nonexistent addresses.





## **Environmental Whistleblower Wins in Poland**

A labor relations court ruled in favor of a former national park employee who sued the agency for unlawful dismissal. The park worker had been fired in retribution for revealing that managers were allowing parks to be used as illegal waste dumps. The Stefan Batory Foundation, which provided legal counsel for the park worker, gained national attention for its accountability and anticorruption work through a series of articles in Poland's largest daily newspaper.

## **OSI Demands Transparency of Disaster Relief in Albania**

A massive explosion at an improvised ammunitions dump outside Tirana killed 26 people, injured over 300, and destroyed or damaged thousands of buildings. The Open Society Foundation for Albania provided victims with communications services to contact loved ones, set up training courses to help people start rebuilding, and launched a project to help families advocate for prompt and fair compensation for the damages they suffered. The project seeks to hold officials and agencies responsible for the disaster and ensure that reconstruction and compensation processes are transparent and free of profiteering or exploitation.

## **Citizens' Council Fights Corruption in Panama**

Citizens in Panama exposed the illegal sale of communal property to tourism developers and uncovered thousands of dollars worth of faulty or incomplete equipment in a community aqueduct project. With OSI support, the Centro de Estudios y Acción Social Panameño trained citizens and helped them form an anticorruption council that discovered these scandals. The council went on to make sure that public officials were held accountable and that companies reimbursed the money they received for the construction contracts.

justice and  
human rights



## **Guantánamo Detainees Win Right to Judicial Review of Detention**

In a historic decision, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that foreign nationals held as “enemy combatants” at the Guantánamo Bay military base in Cuba have a constitutional right to file a writ of habeas corpus in U.S. courts requesting release because their detention is unlawful. The 5–4 ruling, which came after six years of effort by OSI grantees, rebuked Bush administration policies of detaining individuals indefinitely without judicial review. OSI joined an amicus brief filed in the case. In a separate activity, OSI worked to educate the public about the CIA’s use of waterboarding, or simulated drowning, as an interrogation technique that has been denounced as torture by the international community and the U.S. government in the past. Congressional action banning the practice, though vetoed by President Bush, put the CIA on notice that many U.S. legislators, military leaders, and citizens opposed abusive and illegal interrogation methods.

## **Kazakh Court Upholds Prisoner Protests Against Torture**

Kazakhstan’s Constitutional Council overturned a legal provision that reduced the rights of prisoners who protested against the widespread use of torture in the country’s prisons. The decision, based on the case of two inmates supported by the Open Society Justice Initiative, struck down a law that criminalized prisoners’ use of self-mutilation as a form of freedom of expression to protest officials’ failure to address prisoners’ complaints and to stop the use of torture by jailers. The Justice Initiative followed up on the decision by calling on the government to investigate prisoners’ claims and improve efforts to prevent, investigate, and punish torture.

## **Violence Against Women Officially Acknowledged in Lebanon**

The Lebanese government for the first time acknowledged violence against women, pledging to develop women's rights legislation. The pledge was prompted by a letter from Kafa, a Lebanese NGO supported by OSI, which focused on the government's commitments to international treaties like the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

## **OSI Helps Restore Power to Roma Community in Bulgaria**

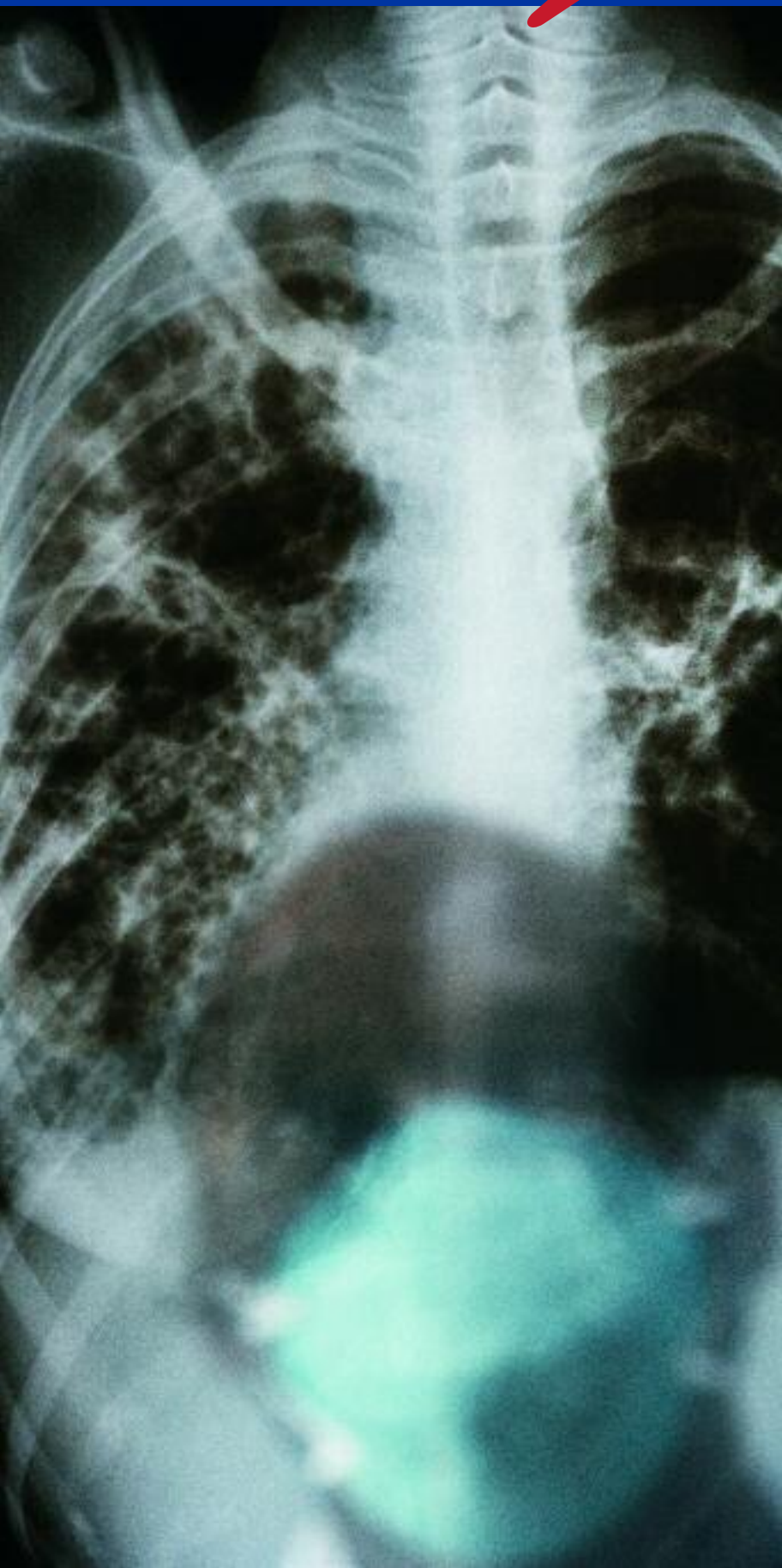
A public-private partnership ended four years of limited access to electricity for 35,000 residents in the Roma settlement of Stolipinovo, Bulgaria. The impoverished community's deep debts to the electricity provider created an ugly cycle of power cuts followed by illegal electricity taps by residents. The Open Society Institute—Sofia brought together electricity providers, local authorities, and a microfinance institution to invest 1.5 million euro in improving the electricity grid and create a micro-funding scheme that allowed residents to pay off their debts while receiving electricity.

## **Businesses Join Campaign Against Uzbekistan's Forced Child Labor**

An international campaign supported by OSI helped prompt major European and U.S. retailers and trade associations, including Wal-Mart, to demand that the government of Uzbekistan stop using child labor to harvest cotton. Cotton picked largely by children in Uzbekistan generates almost \$1 billion in export revenues that are controlled by three state companies not publicly accounted for in the government's budget. A global coalition of rights advocates and socially responsible investors joined by companies, governments, and international organizations recently have stepped up pressure on Uzbekistan to renounce these practices.



public health and  
access to care



## **Bringing Human Rights to the Center of the AIDS Response**

At the 2008 International AIDS Conference in Mexico City, the Public Health Program and its partners raised awareness of the critical need to include human rights in the global AIDS response. OSI and a coalition of human rights and AIDS organizations held the first global rally on human rights and HIV/AIDS, which brought together more than 1,000 activists and people affected by the epidemic. During the rally, the OSI-produced declaration *Human Rights and HIV/AIDS: Now More Than Ever*, endorsed by over 600 organizations worldwide, was presented to high-level officials including UNAIDS Executive Director Peter Piot. The declaration calls on governments and international donors to protect the human rights of stigmatized groups, including sexual minorities, people who use drugs, sex workers, and incarcerated persons.

## **Drug Users Gain Access to Treatment and Legal Aid**

Two pilot projects, supported by the OSI foundation in Armenia, worked to secure hospital-based methadone treatment and legal aid for intravenous drug users. With support from health care and law enforcement agencies, the projects finalized legal procedures for dispensing methadone and made plans to begin providing methadone to 100 clients in early 2009. OSI's Public Health Program has supported more than 200 harm reduction programs, including opiate substitution and needle exchanges, in Central and Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, and Asia.

## **OSI Establishes Scholarship Program for Roma Medical Students**

Responding to a lack of Roma in medical professions, OSI's Public Health Program and the Roma Education Fund launched a \$20 million scholarship program for Roma students to pursue medical and nursing studies. During the pilot year, OSI provided scholarships, advocacy training, and foreign language



tutoring to more than 40 Roma students in Romania. The scholarship program will expand to other Central and Eastern European countries beginning in 2009.

## **OSI Partners with Governments for Alternatives to Asylums**

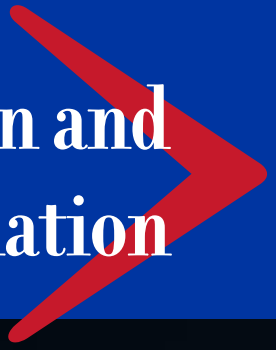
The governments of Macedonia and Moldova took significant steps to end the exclusion of people with intellectual disabilities. In partnership with OSI's Mental Health Initiative, the Macedonian government signed a three-year agreement to move residents from a large institution marked by poor conditions and human rights violations into supported housing services. OSI, the Soros foundation in Moldova, and other NGOs, signed a four-year agreement with the Moldovan government to establish community-based services for children with mental disabilities.

## **New Momentum for LGBT Rights in Kazakhstan**

Negative reactions from the press and the public to plans for a summertime gay pride parade spurred new efforts to promote lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights in Kazakhstan. Acting on reports of a possible parade, "concerned citizens" organized online campaigns to oppose gay rights and flooded human rights organizations like the Soros Foundation Kazakhstan with angry phone calls. Although the Soros foundation had no involvement in parade plans, the strong public anger and intolerance prompted it to respond. With support from OSI's Human Rights and Governance Grants Program and the Sexual Health and Rights Project, the foundation developed a new initiative to work with NGOs, human rights activists, journalists, and the country's LGBT community on public surveys and a report with recommendations on how to reduce discrimination and promote equality. Preliminary findings indicate widespread stigma and discrimination, with a majority of respondents supporting isolation of and physical violence against LGBT people.



education and  
access to information



## **New Admissions Test in Ukraine Improves Access to University**

Ukraine implemented an external university admissions test for the first time at the national level, capping years of work by the International Renaissance Foundation and other NGOs to develop external testing of students' educational achievement. The new system significantly reduces corruption in the admissions process and improves equal access to higher education. Upon completion of the testing, the Ministry of Education and Science decreed that all higher educational institutions will use external assessment results for admissions.

## **Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children Obtain Access to School in Mongolia**

In Mongolia, one of the least populated countries on earth, 1,000 young people—two-thirds of all the country's deaf and hard of hearing children—receive no education. With support from OSI's Education Support Program, the Mongolian Education Alliance gave these children an opportunity to obtain an education and improve their quality of life. Schools received assistance with sign language classes, curriculum development, teacher training, and school transportation.

## **Teachers Help Russian-language Colleagues Learn Estonian**

In response to Estonia's gradual transition from Russian to Estonian in the nation's schools, a mentoring program paired teachers from Russian-language schools with partners from Estonian-language schools. Started by the Open Estonia Foundation, the mentoring program increases the sense of inclusion, commitment to community, and the Estonian language skills of Russian school teachers by bringing teachers together for one year to do cultural education activities and practice Estonian in real life situations.



Teenage orphan at a safehouse where she continues her education after leaving her village and an arranged early marriage, Kenya.

## Reports Confront School Absences in Baltimore

In Baltimore public schools, 14 percent of elementary school students, 34 percent of middle school students, and 44 percent of high school students missed 20 or more school days during the 2006–2007 academic year. OSI-Baltimore brought public attention to the epidemic of school absences with a series of reports outlining the problem and recommending clear actions and remedies. OSI is leading an effort to reduce absences by engaging children in school and removing barriers to regular attendance, including the overuse of suspension and expulsion.

## Roma Films and Art Receive International Recognition

In a first for a Roma-produced program, the Monte Carlo Television Festival nominated *Trapped—The Forgotten Story of the Mitrovica Roma* in the Best News Documentary category. Shown on Hungarian national TV with funding from OSI's Roma Initiatives program, *Trapped* highlighted the underreported human rights violations and displacement experienced by Roma during the conflict in Kosovo in the late 1990s. To change attitudes about the Roma, OSI also funded the Roma filmmaker Arpád Bogdan's *Looking for My Gypsy Roots*, which aired on the BBC, and the Chachipe and Paradise Lost photography and art exhibitions.

## Community Radio Brings News to Iraqi Refugees in Jordan

To help inform the 700,000 to 800,000 Iraqi refugees living in Jordan, a community radio station launched *Iraqi Hour*, a news program focusing on refugee issues. With support from OSI's Middle East and North Africa Initiative, Al-Balad, Jordan's main community radio station, developed *Iraqi Hour* programming to address access to education, the availability of public services, and other social and cultural issues. *Iraqi Hour* also uses radio journalism to examine hardships faced by the Iraqi refugee community such as physical displacement, unemployment, and resentment from native Jordanians.

[www.soros.org](http://www.soros.org)



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