



United States Mission to the OSCE

Session 15 Commitments Regarding Roma and Sinti

As prepared for delivery by Dr. Ethel Brooks
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Madam Moderator,

The situation for Romani people in the OSCE region is decidedly mixed. On the one hand, there are places where, as Czech sociologist Ivan Gabal said, an integration problem has become a security problem—where extremism and acts of violence have risen to frightening levels and bigotry is voiced by even "mainstream" political leaders.

Indeed, although he said it a decade ago, the observations of the High Commissioner on National Minorities in his 2000 report on the situation of Roma in the OSCE remains strikingly relevant today: “Even against the backdrop of a decade blighted by extreme forms of racist intolerance, the phenomenon of prejudice against Roma is singular. Romani communities are the subject of hostile perceptions across an extraordinary range of countries. In some, politicians and citizens feel few scruples about expressing derogatory stereotypes of Roma.”

On the other hand, the potential for real improvement seems tantalizingly possible. Certainly, the situation of Roma is being examined and debated as never before.

This morning, I shared some thoughts about a dangerous kind of racist rhetoric that fuels bigotry against Roma, contributes to their marginalization, and may even contribute to violence against Roma—in other words, I focused on what public leaders *shouldn't* say. This afternoon, I'd like to share some thoughts about what they *should* say.

First of all, I think we have to acknowledge that, for all the research and writing going on right now, reliable research data are still in woefully short supply. So if we want to know what unemployment rates are among Roma, or education

levels, there need to be disaggregated statistics. It is especially important to gather these kinds of data so that there are benchmarks to measure both where we are succeeding and where we have not yet succeeded. With the adoption of the European Union Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies, the need for this kind of information becomes even more urgent.

Nevertheless, even with its limitations, the available data certainly draw a clear enough picture of the status quo—and it is not a pretty picture. In fact, Roma have suffered the most in the transition from a command to a market economy, and rank discrimination contributes to their extreme marginalization. The bleak situation for Roma throughout Europe has been exacerbated by the current global economic crisis, where Roma have increasingly become targets of racist violence and state discrimination across Europe.

Under these circumstances, one of the most important things that government leaders can do is to explain the cost of Romani marginalization and the larger benefits of inclusion.

For example, the World Bank and the Open Society Institute have, separately, published studies examining the economic implications of the marginalization of Roma in at least a half a dozen countries. One World Bank study of four OSCE participating States noted that “Roma are Europe’s largest and poorest minority group, as well as one of its fastest growing populations...the fiscal benefits of inclusion far outweigh the investments necessary to close the education gap” between Roma and non-Roma, and that “bridging the labor market gap could add up to six billion euro” to the GDP and billions more to government revenues. Another study found that the investment in education, job training and similar measures needed for Romani inclusion would be far outweighed by the revenues generated by the subsequent increase in the labor force.

Unfortunately, one would be hard pressed to find a major policy address—made to a domestic audience—by a senior political figure on why societies as a whole benefit from investing in the education and employment of Roma.

While there are very few cabinet level officials who have risen to this challenge, Mayor Tsonko Tsonev of the small Bulgarian town of Kavarna is leading by example. He has not only made it his practice to speak of the benefits of inclusion, but he has also made it the policy of his municipality. It is especially

noteworthy that the mayor ensured that Romani housing had a legal, recognized status.

Finally, Madam Moderator, I want to commend ODIHR for its work on Romani human rights issues. It is exceedingly difficult to address issues such as access to education while at the same time responding to urgent human rights issues relating to Roma, and we believe ODIHR must continue to do both.

Thank you.