



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

Implementing Good Intentions

Address to a Conference on

"Equal Opportunities for Roma and Sinti: Translating Words into Facts"

by

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Mr. Chairman,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to address this conference. I applaud the initiative taken by the Romanian Chairmanship and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights in organizing this meeting.

I agree very much with the sentiment of the conference theme, namely translating words into facts. I have only been OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities for a few months, but it has already come to my attention that more needs to be done to turn good intentions into concrete action when it comes to Roma issues. This should occur at several levels: at the international level, at the regional level, in the OSCE community, at the State level, at the local level, and among Roma themselves.

At the international level, I think that conferences like this one present a good opportunity to focus on lessons learned, to compare different approaches, and to address some of the ongoing challenges. This conference also provides a vital interface between Roma, governmental, non-governmental and institutional representatives.

I am glad to see that the agenda is specific, aimed at concrete proposals. We should keep in mind over the next few days that we, as a community, have an obligation to translate words into facts.

In that respect, we should be careful about passing responsibility for the evidently poor situation of the Roma back and forth between individual governments and the international community. Sometimes governments argue that the situation of the Roma defies boundaries and is therefore a European or international problem. On the other hand, multilateral bodies sometimes argue that the main onus for addressing Roma issues rests on individual States that have significant Roma populations. In my view, both of these arguments are correct. Europe's Roma face challenges that are not specific to any one country. While avoiding sweeping generalizations, it is fair to say that there are similarities in the social, economic, political and cultural conditions of Roma in a number of OSCE States. Moreover, from an OSCE perspective, we share a common public interest in ensuring that all persons and communities in our region of the world enjoy a minimum of respect for their human rights, including equal opportunities.

I believe that it is in our overall public interest to ensure that no communities are excluded or alienated from the mainstream of public life, whether social, economic or political. Indeed, history shows convincingly that such exclusion and alienation over time threaten the broader stability and security of our societies. Further, our tolerance of such situations is an indictment of our real values as it challenges the integrity of our own words. One can therefore look at Roma issues from a global perspective. As such, this conference is wholly appropriate and even overdue. But, as the saying goes, one should think globally, and act locally.

To begin at the State level, it is important for Governments to adopt and implement strategies to address Roma issues and concerns. I note that in the past few years several States have developed such strategies. Our host country, Romania, is an example. These strategies should not be seen as an end in themselves; they are the beginning of a process.

Sometimes Roma strategies are rather ambitious. This is encouraging. But in order for them to be more than a list of good intentions, they require political will, practical programmes and sufficient resources. Governments sometimes have difficulties raising more than a fraction of the necessary funds. For States in transition, that is understandable as we are usually talking about substantial sums of money. Here international assistance is vital. We must continue to find and target resources in order to assist governments in addressing Roma issues, whether it be through the European Union, the Stability Pact or any other available source. Roma representatives should be involved in the development, oversight and implementation of projects that affect them. There should also be sufficient capacity-building in order to allow the Roma and relevant institutions to effectively use the resources available.

But money is not the only solution. As my predecessor, Max van der Stoep, said in his report of last year on the Situation of Roma and Sinti in the OSCE Area, "discrimination and exclusion are fundamental features of the Roma experience". If one can confront discrimination and exclusion, one has a better chance of tackling all of the other issues that follow from them: problems of housing, employment, healthcare, migration, integration, education, racial violence, and political participation. A legal framework including anti-discrimination legislation and mechanisms of implementation like Equality Commissions or Ombudsmen is vital. So too are police training, political leadership and a judicial system prepared to uphold the rule of law.

Combating discrimination also requires public education to challenge stereotypes, familiarize people with other cultures and open minds about other members of society. Here the media can play a useful role.

Successful strategies must go beyond good co-operation between Roma representatives and the governmental authorities. Local officials and administrative organs of the State must follow central government directives. Putting policy into action is essential for any society functioning under the rule of law.

Roma themselves have an important responsibility and a special role. They must be partners, if not leaders, in shaping their own destiny. I must say that I am impressed by the constructive spirit that I observe among members of the Roma community. I sense that there is an understanding that progress can be best achieved through concrete projects and specific initiatives in co-operation with governmental and other partners.

An important challenge is to tap into resources and to channel existing expertise into those areas where it is most needed. Here I think that non-governmental organizations can be particularly helpful. NGOs, by necessity, have considerable experience in drafting project proposals, fund raising, awareness raising and navigating through political and diplomatic channels. This expertise should be pooled and shared in order

to best serve the interests of the Roma. That being said, the main responsibility for developing and implementing effective policy lies with the State.

While we may conclude that responsibility is shared, we can not let the Roma issue fall through the cracks of international or domestic agendas. We can not pass the buck because it is someone else's responsibility. Let me emphasise again that we face matters of public interest at various levels for which we have a common interest to find solutions. The way that we address the situation – in fact, situations – of the Roma must be reflective of our commitment to human rights in deeds and not only words. Overall, our individual and collective engagement should demonstrate our commitment to integrating diversity within society on the basis of equal rights and opportunities and shared destiny.

I am aware that the challenges are many and substantial. There is no quick fix. What is needed is a long-term commitment with full co-operation and co-ordination among the whole international community. Within our own scope of action, we, as the OSCE, need a strategy and the resources to effectively implement it. This is what was asked of us at the Istanbul Summit when participating States agreed that we should elaborate an action plan of targeted activities. My office is willing and prepared to be involved in contributing ideas to this plan. I think that a good starting point is the recommendations made by my predecessor in his report of last year.

An immediate step should be the strengthening of the OSCE Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues. If we all accept that Roma issues require further attention (particularly in the OSCE), then we should not hesitate to strengthen what is now a proven resource. If we are to broaden our ambitions, we need to invest more resources, both financial and human. One professional post in our organisation is woefully inadequate.

I also believe that the Contact Point should be given a more pro-active mandate to analyze information concerning Roma-related measures undertaken by governments. OSCE States should respond in a timely way to specific questions concerning their policies and practices in respect of Roma that may be formulated by the Contact Point. Governments should more extensively draw on the expertise of the Contact Point in terms of mechanisms to ensure the effective participation of Roma in policy-making and public life in general, enhancing electoral participation and efforts to combat discrimination (particularly by public officials). The Contact Point should also be able to conduct on-site inquiries, as necessary, to investigate conditions affecting Roma. I believe that this has already been tested to some effect in Kosovo.

The High Commissioner's office can be helpful in providing expertise on anti-discrimination legislation and the integration of the Roma into public life. That being said, I want to make it clear that my mandate relates to national minority issues that affect peace, stability or relations between participating States. I am therefore principally concerned with security issues, acting as an instrument of conflict prevention.

Of course, our common goal should be that inter-ethnic and minority issues do not become security issues. We must therefore ensure equal opportunities for all members

of society so that *difference* is not interpreted as *threat* or that one's ethnicity or the colour of one's skin does not become the basis for discrimination or exclusion. Distrust and hatred can lead to a cycle of violence that destabilizes societies. Furthermore, the failure to tackle underlying issues will cause problems to fester. It is therefore in everyone's interest – in terms of stability and, ultimately, prosperity – that Roma issues are addressed in a comprehensive, sincere, and effective fashion.

To conclude, I think that it is fair to say that in the past few years important steps have been taken in terms of addressing what is one of Europe's most grievous human rights and humanitarian situations. We are all now much more aware of the issues, Roma have begun to effectively mobilize themselves, and governments have become more pro-active in developing strategies to address Roma concerns. In the months and years ahead, we need to concentrate on using and enhancing the mechanisms that are in place and effectively implementing the strategies that have been, or are being, devised. Our deeds will speak louder than our words.

Thank you for your attention and I wish you much success in your deliberations during this conference.