

Testimony :Hon. Alcee L. Hastings

Co-Chairman - Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for coming to the Helsinki Commission's briefing on "Hard Times and Hardening Attitudes: The Economic Downturn and the Rise of Violence against Roma."

In 2005, the European Union Parliament estimated that there are 12-15 million in Europe. As such, Roma constitute Europe's largest ethnic minority – and, unfortunately, they remain one of its most marginalized.

This year, we are marking the 20th anniversary of the fall of communism. In most respects, that is a very happy anniversary. But in the past 20 years, too few of the fruits of democracy have reached the Romani minority.

I know there has been some progress. Significantly, the lifting of the Iron Curtain has, I think, improved the opportunities for Roma to have better contacts across borders – across Eastern and Western Europe – to work together to meet the challenges that they must face in defending their basic human rights.

Today, it seems those challenges are as great as ever.

Two months ago in Hungary, Jenő Koka went out his front door to go to work at the same factory he'd worked at for decades, and was shot to death in front of his own home. His 84-year-old father, Gábor Toth is a Holocaust survivor.

In the Czech Republic, even as we hold this briefing, two-year-old Natalie Sivakova is still fighting for her life in intensive care after her home was firebombed, leaving her burned over 80% of her body.

In February, also in Hungary, five-year old Robert Csorba and his father were riddled with bullets to prevent them from escaping their firebombed homes. These deaths are absolute tragedies and appear to be part of a larger and escalating pattern of deadly violence against Roma.

I look forward to hearing from each of our panelists today on what they believe are the causes of this spike in violence, whether there are countries that have not witnessed the same spike and if so why might that be, what the implications of these trends are, and what OSCE countries ought to be doing about this.

I want to welcome and introduce our four witnesses:

First, Katalin Barsony from Hungary, who is a sociologist, film maker and project manager at the Budapest-based Roma NGO Romedia Foundation.

Stanislav Daniel, from Slovakia, is a Research Consultant with the Budapest-based European Roma Rights Center, covering issues relating to the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Isabela Mihalache, from Romania, is Senior Program Manager at Roma Initiatives, an Open Society Institute program in Budapest.

And let me express my appreciation here to the Open Society Institute for facilitating the availability of these three witnesses.

Finally, we're also joined by Andrzej Mirga. Mr. Mirga serves as OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights' advisor with responsibility for Romani issues. In that capacity, he works to promote the full integration of Roma into the societies they live in, while preserving their identity.

In point of fact, Mr. Mirga was one of four Romani nongovernmental activists who testified before the Congress in 1994 – 15 years ago – before a committee and headed by my good friend Tom Lantos, whom we miss very much. It was the first time Roma had ever testified before any Congressional body – but, thankfully, not the last. Mr. Mirga has appeared before for the Helsinki Commission as well and we are very glad to have you back. Thank all of you for coming such a long way to be here.