

## Roma and Sinti in Crisis and Aftermath: Preventing Intolerance, Enhancing Integration

*Andrzej Mirga*

*Senior Adviser on Roma and Sinti Issues*

*OSCE ODIHR*

*Warsaw, Poland*

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Honorable Chairperson,  
Distinguished Members of Helsinki Commission,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

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I would like first to express my gratitude to the chairperson of the Helsinki Commission for organizing this hearing on Roma and Sinti today. It's a great opportunity to share with you our views and concerns regarding Roma and Sinti in the OSCE area with this important Commission. It's the right time to address these issues, as some developments in recent years are highly disturbing and we need to speak up about them.

I testified here with several Roma friends in mid-2009. It was a time when the financial and economic crisis had erupted and we signalled the worrying developments that were evolving with regard to Roma and Sinti. Today, with fiscal difficulties in a number of European countries and a second economic crisis looming, I have to report to you that some of these concerns, unfortunately, have become reality. No doubt, the ongoing economic difficulties have intensified uncertainty and exacerbated some of the negative trends I elaborated upon in the briefing in 2009.

On a general note, let me underline that most problems facing Roma and Sinti populations have by no means been resolved and, for the most part, this minority has not yet benefited from lasting improvements in human rights and social inclusion; this is unfinished business in Europe that requires much stronger and longer-term interventions at national and European levels. That was one of the conclusions in my 2009 briefing here, based upon the findings of ODIHR's 2008 Status Report on Implementation of the Action Plan for Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti in the OSCE Area. This conclusion is more valid than ever today.

Currently, it seems the requirement for much stronger and longer-term intervention is widely recognized, as all major international organizations and EU institutions are calling upon governments to step up their efforts to realize objectives regarding Roma and Sinti social inclusion. This is done partly as a response to a serious and dangerous rise in violence and intolerance against members of this minority in a number of countries. It comes, however, at a time when European governments face real fiscal and economic difficulties, making it a bad time to approach them on other issues. Governments are facing tough decisions on the introduction of austerity programmes to reduce public spending and keep national debt under control.

In the 2009 briefing I mentioned ODIHR plans to conduct a field-assessment visit to Hungary. We spent nearly two weeks in the field there, produced a report with a set of recommendations, and have since organized follow-up activities with the Hungarian authorities. Our time in the different localities we visited, including those where Roma had been attacked, and some killed, provided us with a sense of what was going on at the grass-roots level, what people, both Roma and non-Roma, felt, and of developing trends. Clearly, the economic gap between the majority population and the Roma was not diminishing, there were underlying causes for tensions, and feelings of insecurity or being threatened by radical groups were high among Roma.

I claimed also that the next elections in Hungary would be a test case for the extreme right' quest for political power and for the effectiveness of their anti-Roma campaign. Regrettably, those campaigning using anti-Roma rhetoric attracted significant support. We see this development as part of a dangerous trend in Europe, with more such extreme-right, populist and nationalist groups entering into mainstream politics; examples of this trend can be found in a number of OSCE participating States. Another test case is approaching with Slovakia's parliamentary elections, where one party is already openly using anti-Roma rhetoric in its campaign.

Roma and Sinti migration has become a key challenge, and it will likely remain so for some time. The social stigma associated with Roma and their visibility as migrants will continue to heighten the risks of discriminatory practices and of social exclusion in countries of destination.

In the past two years, in the context of deepening economic hardships, we have witnessed a number of disturbing developments. There was the crisis related to Roma migrants in France, we have seen the rise of tensions with extreme-right or neo-Nazi groups in North Bohemia in the Czech Republic, we have seen mass protests against Roma in a number of cities in Bulgaria, following the incidents in Katunitsa, near Plovdiv.

In most of these situations we have seen populist, extreme-right or neo-Nazi groups actively exploiting anti-Roma prejudice, sometimes generating hostility or instigating violence against Roma and Sinti communities. We are concerned about current public discourse on Roma and Sinti that revives past anti-Roma rhetoric, centred on the image of them as "nomads", viewing them as a burden to social system or as dangers for public security and order based on alleged 'Gypsy criminality'.

The rise in open and often radical anti-Roma politics and policies at local levels is another challenging and new phenomenon. We witness local authorities and mayors actively pursuing policies aimed at forcing Roma and Sinti from their communities. Exclusion or separation is openly advocated in some municipalities, including in the segregation of children in educational systems. There are also cases of the refusal by local authorities to accept or request state aid aimed at supporting Roma communities.

The Roma and Sinti, along with other disadvantaged minorities, are right now passing through 'hard times', facing 'hardening attitudes' - just to recall the title of last year's briefing. This sense of hardship for Roma and Sinti is well illustrated in OSCE documents. The Astana Declaration, the 2009 Ministerial Council Decision from Athens the 2010 Review Conference in Warsaw, OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Belgrade Declaration and the 2011 Human Dimension Implementation Meeting Special Roma

Day all addressed concerns regarding rising levels of violence and intolerance against members of this minority. Most recently, on 1 of February this year, the Declaration on the Rise of anti-Gypsyism and Racist Violence against Roma in Europe was adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe; the Committee expressed its deep concern about this trend.

ODIHR in the past have been more focused on providing assistance to newer democracies and States in crisis or post-crisis situations. Today, and likely over the near future, such an assistance will be provided to consolidated and young democracies as instances of hate crime targeting Roma and Sinti may become a recurrent issue there. ODIHR has followed all of these developments closely and will continue to do so. The office managed to organize several field assessment visits to participating States and is preparing next one: all were led by the Senior Adviser on Roma and Sinti Issues.

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Parallel to these worrying developments, we are witnessing more promising efforts and initiatives aimed at ensuring human rights and social inclusion of Roma and Sinti. The most important are the new agenda of the European Union on Roma. With EU enlargements in 2004 and 2007 that brought in a majority of Europe's Roma population, the centre of gravity for Roma and Sinti issues has, quite understandably, shifted to the EU and its institutions. The EU has both the political and financial tools to enforce some measures on its member States, something that other organizations do not have.

Most recently, on 5 April 2011, the Commission issued a communication on an EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies, which was endorsed by the European Council in June. The Framework commits all 27 Member States to the development of targeted policies that systematically tackle the socio-economic exclusion of and discrimination against Roma people throughout the EU.

This complex EU agenda on Roma and Sinti has been overshadowed by the euro crisis itself. Much of the response to the question of how this new effort of the EU regarding Roma can be successful and lasting will depend on the responses to other questions: How will the EU resolve the present crisis, and how long it will take to recover from it? Surprisingly little attention however, appears to having been paid to its possible negative impact on the most socially and economically disadvantaged groups in societies, including the Roma and Sinti. There seems to be a somehow parallel discourse on Roma disconnected from ongoing debates and concerns.

The enlargement has been a matter of politics and not exclusively of standards and benchmarks. Pre-accession support programmes for Roma did not work to better integrate them; these programmes helped to design activities and establish offices for Roma policy, but were mere 'window dressing'. Regrettably, expensive EU-funded projects have left few traces of outputs in Roma communities or a sense that these communities benefited. They remain socially excluded, with only a minimal chance of increased integration and improving their lives.

The reports recently commissioned by the EU on use of its financial and policy instruments with regards Roma are in most parts critical: minimal progress has been achieved, disproportional funds were used to produce short-lived outcomes; existing

initiatives and programmes have been confronted with a lack of political will at both the national and local levels; the effective use of structural funds as, well as the possibility of funds being misused, have both come into question. The reports recommended setting benchmarks and improving monitoring and evaluation, as well as focusing on attaining results and outcomes.

To conclude this part: prospects in the short term appear poor in fields where there has been some constant, if minor, improvement in the past, such as in education, housing, political participation or Roma representation in public media. In a number of participating States there appear to have been setbacks in the areas mentioned above, as the gap between standards for Roma and Sinti and the majority populations have been, in fact, widening. With few social or economic indicators showing improvement in the situation of Roma, and evidence of increasing hostility toward their communities among non-Roma in some States, these disturbing trends might not just continue, but could very well worsen.

In the crisis like this one the greatest challenge is raising the level of employment and opportunities for income among members of Roma and Sinti communities. Both the lack of education and skills and well as discrimination in the labour market effectively hinder progress in this area. The issue is even more challenging with the rising level of unemployment among majority populations, including among graduates and the young.

Roma civil society has undergone difficult times as well. First, with accession concluded, donors and big private foundations tend to move their activities out from new EU countries. Within the EU space, Roma civil society, in particular, faces hardship in securing funding. Currently, the main sources for funding have become the state and/or EU financial instruments. Dependency on state funding brings limitations and disadvantages; funding may depend on the good will of a particular administration or other considerations. The weak development of human resources on the part of Roma organizations also impacts negatively on the securing of funding from EU sources; access to EU funding opportunities are a matter of specialized skills, knowledge and structures.. As a result, Roma civil society may face difficulties in securing funds.

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What therefore would I urge states to do?

Rising racism and extreme right pose a real threat to minorities, including immigrants and Roma and Sinti and, in consequence to social cohesion. Renewing commitments to teaching tolerance and preventing activities of neo-Nazi and extreme right groups is a most urgent need. The media can play a crucial role in combating discrimination and prejudices against minorities, immigrants and in particular Roma and Sinti. This is definitely an area where more attention and energy has to be invested in the future.

The best way to deal with the future consequences of today's economic difficulties is to invest in education. This is particularly the case for the Roma and Sinti, who suffer the most from a lack of education and skills. The key here is both to work with parents, particularly the mothers, of Roma and Sinti children to raise their level of commitment and determination to push their children through education.

I would recommend investing more in Roma and Sinti youth. The number of Roma and Sinti students at universities is rising. They need to be embraced and supported, as they can be the agents of change in Roma communities

There is a need to empower Roma and Sinti organizations, which will increasingly face challenges in attracting funding right now. Such grass-root organizations will be needed to win over the local authorities that are key for Roma and Sinti inclusion. Municipal associations, mayoral offices and local agencies are of central importance.

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Examples of good practices are tested by civil society, demonstrating which projects need to be scaled-up, adopted by the government, and introduced in a systemic way. I would stress, however, that the most important actors are ultimately Roma and Sinti families and individuals; they should play a key role in successfully overcoming disadvantages and become self-reliant and successful in their lives.

The EU and national governments have to adopt a long-term approach. Some of the problems are deeply entrenched, and there are no quick fixes to attain goals like raising the level of education among Roma to a level comparable to national averages, or reducing levels of Roma unemployment or effectively countering discrimination faced by Roma in all areas of life.

The implementation of various policies and measures has to be assessed and monitored. This work will be increasingly important for governments and the EU and other international stakeholders – there is a need for evidence-based policy design and accurate evaluation of outcomes.

Co-operation and co-ordination is required not only to limit duplication, secure better outcomes, and ensure greater impact, but also to ensure more effective use of available funding. Future EU Roma policy should endeavour to maintain a balance between the responsibilities of EU institutions and their instruments and policies, and those of Member States. Such a policy shall not be an alibi on the part of the states for inaction, neglect or the view that Brussels is responsible. Stronger involvement on the part of the EU and the financial resources it has to offer can provide a push in the right direction.

ODIHR continues to foster its co-operation with the European Commission. This year ODIHR has been one of the key partners for the EC's Directorate General for Enlargement, which held a series of high-level roundtables on Roma in the context of the EU accession process in Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and Albania. ODIHR has been awarded an EC grant of over three million Euros for a regional project on "Best Practices for Roma Integration" in the Western Balkans. The implementation of the project started in January, and the project will be carried out over 23 months in close co-operation with OSCE field operations.

This project demonstrates that the EU and the OSCE are increasingly co-coordinating and co-operating on issues of concern with regard to human rights and democratization.

I take the opportunity here to thank United States for its substantial financial support for the project, and Germany, which has also provided support.

Let me end by thanking Ms. Erika Schlager, a professional staff member at the Helsinki Commission. I admire her, as she is tireless in all her efforts to address and promote Roma rights here in Washington and in the entire OSCE world. This hearing is thanks also to her commitment and efforts.

Thank you.