



**Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
High Commissioner on National Minorities**

STATEMENT

by

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to the

2009 Human Dimension Implementation Meeting

Working Session 14

**Specifically selected topic: Roma and Sinti and, in particular, early education
for Roma and Sinti children**

[Check Against Delivery]

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Education was also the topic chosen by the High Commissioner for the special session on national minorities which took place here last week. In his introductory address the High Commissioner stressed the importance of education as a major integration tool for cohesive societies. On the basis of his 15 years experience on conflict prevention activities throughout the OSCE region it is the High Commissioner's strong belief that disregarding the role of education as a tool for integration not only limits the individual's possibility to reach their personal and professional potential to their fullest but may also hinder the development of a cohesive society.

The situation of Roma and Sinti has been, and remains, an issue of major concern for the High Commissioner. The main general conclusion of all the HCNM reports and statements on the Roma issue since 1993 is that discrimination against Roma and Sinti persists in many key areas of life such as education. In fact, education related issues have traditionally been prominent in all the HCNM reports on the situation of Roma and Sinti in the OSCE area. Problems such as illiteracy, lack of formal education and segregation were highlighted in the relevant HCNM reports and concrete recommendations were brought forward by the High Commissioner.

Conscious of the importance of education for the successful and sustainable inclusion of the Roma and Sinti across the OSCE region the High Commissioner systematically raises this issue during his bilateral visits in cases where it is relevant. More specifically, the High Commissioner consistently raises the issue of the persistent segregation of Romani children in the education system – either in special schools and classes for children with mental disabilities and learning difficulties or in Roma-only mainstream schools. In the view of the High Commissioner such segregation violates the Roma children's right to an education free from discrimination; gives little possibility for reintegrating into mainstream schools or advancing to secondary education; and diminishes their future employment prospects. On the basis of his clear mandate on this issue, stemming from the 2003 Action Plan task to assist participating States to comply with their commitments to provide free and equal access to public education to all members of society and to improve the situation of Roma and Sinti people in this respect, the High Commissioner constantly underscores his concerns, seeks to raise awareness and offers his expertise to the participating States in view of

planning, preparing and implementing concrete relevant policies and legislative decisions.

Recognising the importance of the benefits of early education the High Commissioner acknowledges that the Ministerial Council Decision No. 6/08 on promoting access of Roma and Sinti children to early education is a significant step forward in prioritizing the strategic objective of access to mainstream education and is working closely with ODIHR on the implementation of this Decision. It is in this vein that the High Commissioner also welcomes the initiative of the Greek CiO to organise today's meeting on the specifically selected topic of Roma and Sinti early education during the Human Dimension Implementing Meeting, from which he would further welcome any follow up in this respect.

In this framework and on the basis of his experience the High Commissioner would like to draw the attention of the participating States to the need to enhance the consultation of Roma and Sinti in the design and implementation of Roma and Sinti related policies. In particular, with regard to the education issue the active involvement of parents at school level is vital for the success of effective access of Roma and Sinti children to education.

Finally, acknowledging the expertise of other international organizations as well as the importance of international co-operation the High Commissioner would recommend the enhancement of international co-operation on Roma issues. Indeed the Office of the HCNM is working closely with other international organizations such as the Council of Europe and the EU. Last year, a Study on Roma Migration was commissioned jointly by the Office of the OSCE High Commissioner and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe and a joint action program on Roma was adopted last year by OSCE, the Council of Europe and the EU Fundamental Rights Agency. In the framework of the implementation of this joint action programme the three organisations have issued a joint press release on International Roma Day and are planning to hold a Joint Conference on Roma Migration that will take place in Vienna on 9 and 10 of November. Education related issues are prominent in all the above initiatives.

In the light of the above and as a concluding remark, I would like to stress the High Commissioner's personal commitment to continue to raise awareness regarding the problems faced by Roma communities; to combat every form of discrimination against Roma; and to contribute in achieving the inclusion of Roma people by using all the tools as his disposal in that regard. The Office of the High Commissioner is committed to enhance its efforts, in close co-operation with other OSCE institutions and in particular ODIHR and the OSCE field missions, within existing resources, to assist participating States to fight phenomena of discrimination against Roma and Sinti, to implement properly the OSCE commitments pertaining in particular to the implementation of the Action Plan on improving the situation of Roma and Sinti within the OSCE Area and address the challenges of education of Roma and Sinti children.