

United States Mission to the OSCE

Session 15: Roma and Sinti

*Early education
Specially selected topic*

As prepared for delivery by Petra Gelbart
to the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
October 7, 2009

Thank you Mr. Moderator,

Greetings to the audience. *Te aven bachtale Romale. Me som but rado hoj s'aj vakerav pal amare c'havore adadives.* [Greetings, Roma. I am very glad for the opportunity to speak about our children today.] The United States recognizes that every government here has committed to the principle of equality of opportunity in the field of education, and we vigorously support that commitment.

Principle, however, is one thing, and practice is another. In many countries, there is a significant gap between the policies of inclusion articulated in capitals, and the practices of exclusion that often prevail at the local level. It is not just that political rhetoric is not matched by political will. It is also that local practices and stated government policies often appear to clash. While government officials consistently say they want to increase Romani school attendance, a plethora of practices in municipalities undercuts that very goal.

Indeed, it sometimes seems that many local authorities not only want to keep Roma out of the schools, but would like to see Roma leave their jurisdictions altogether. In some places, community prejudice and hostility impede efforts to establish integrated schools.

In fact, there are many things that can obstruct Romani participation in education, and these barriers may vary considerably from one town to the next. In some localities, Roma have been turned away from schools because they lack documents – even when national law theoretically makes school attendance compulsory. At last year's Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting, NGOs reported that in some school districts in Italy, Roma were turned away when they tried to register because the schools were “full.”

In some localities, the absence of adequate transportation to take Romani children to schools is a real problem. Where Romani children lack warm clothing and shoes, the lack of transportation takes on even greater significance. Some Roma have also reported that it is difficult to send their children to school if they do not have food to eat for breakfast before going to school, or lunch to eat during the day.

In the United States, education is highly decentralized, and most decision-making is left to the states and to local governments. But we have established a federal system to provide subsidized school lunches to improve school participation for those at the lowest income levels.

We welcome initiatives which seek to address practical barriers to increased Romani access to education. As the High Commissioner on National Minorities recommended, “Governments should adopt programs that would ensure that the costs of meals, textbooks and similar costs related to education are covered with respect to children whose parents cannot afford to pay these costs.” The Czech Republic has begun such a program for high school students. As another example, some countries, including Sweden, have launched programs employing teacher's assistants recruited from Romani communities.

To improve Romani school attendance, some governments may need to recalibrate the balance between centralization and decentralization. There must be enough decentralization so that localities can identify, meet, and overcome the specific challenges that exist in their towns or villages. But there must also be enough centralization to ensure that laws and court judgments barring discriminatory practices are fully and effectively implemented.

Mr. Moderator, one of the more controversial ideas that emerged in recent years is the idea of sending Roma to boarding schools. Perhaps for some, this phrase evokes images of quaint country schools, crisp uniforms, and obedient little pupils. But in some countries, and unfortunately this includes the United States, until fairly recently boarding schools for select minorities (in our case, Native Americans) were often associated with forced assimilation and abuse. In states with a history of removing Romani children from their families, often under very weak pretexts, to be raised and educated in institutions, the creation of boarding schools runs the risk of perpetuating many of the practices that have caused irreparable psychological harm to alarming numbers of Romani minors.

This is not to say that boarding schools can never be vibrant, nurturing centers for learning. But there are significant challenges in making them work *for* minorities, and not *against* them. In particular, educational decisions must be made with the full and informed consent of parents – and there are already complaints that schools are failing in some cases to obtain properly *informed* consent from Romani parents regarding other education decisions.

I know that anything with budget implications can be a tough sell, especially in a time of economic cut-backs, but the cost of continuing to marginalize Roma far exceeds the cost of ensuring full and equal access to education. As former President of Harvard University Derek Bok remarked, “[i]f you think education is expensive, try ignorance.”

Thank you, Mr. Moderator.