



Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights

REPORT OF THE ROUNDTABLE “IMPLEMENTATION OF THE OSCE ACTION PLAN ON ROMA AND SINTI: ASSISTANCE TO BELARUS”

Minsk, 18 March 2008

The roundtable, organized jointly with the OSCE Office in Minsk, follows a field visit conducted by the ODIHR in Belarus, in late 2007.

It gathered government officials, members of parliament and representatives of ministries, as well as international Roma experts and Roma representatives from Belarus. The event was coordinated at the national level with the Committee of Affairs of Religions and Nationalities, represented by Mr. Lameka Uladzimir and with the Belarusian Gypsy Diaspora organization, represented by Mr. Oleg Kozlovski.

The purpose of the roundtable was to discuss the situation of Roma in Belarus with a view to implementation of commitments contained in the Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti within the OSCE Area (Maastricht MC 3/03). During the event, the ODIHR reiterated earlier offer to provide assistance to the government of Belarus for the development of a governmental programme for Roma.

The roundtable provided a useful platform for Roma participants to voice their concerns and discuss possible state action. A comprehensive governmental programme was requested by Roma representatives, who declared an interest to be actively involved in drafting such a programme. They also expressed hopes that a similar level of commitment and action, as in other countries of Europe, will be undertaken by the Belarusian government. With few exceptions, most European countries with Roma populations have adopted strategies, action plans, or governmental programmes to improve the situation of Roma.

The debate helped to identify some major concerns and problems. The deterioration of the social and economic situation of Roma in Belarus, especially with regard to the level of prejudice the majority population expresses towards this group was discussed. In the case of the latter, concern was voiced by Roma over the phenomenon of ‘criminalizing’ Roma in Belarus, either by media and/or state agencies, such as the police. Other areas of concern include living conditions, access to education, lack of political participation, and civil registration.

Of particular concern, according to the Belarusian Roma representatives, is high unemployment – up to 80% in some regions in Roma communities. High illiteracy coupled with discrimination makes it even more difficult to secure jobs. Traditional sources of income for many families - trading, scrap metal recycling, construction and agricultural labor (similar to Russia or Ukraine) is limited.

While the overall level of education of Belarusian Roma is quite low, with only a few who enter secondary-level education, there is also an increased interest in accessing higher education for the younger Roma generation.

Roma participants also signaled that they realize the importance of being represented, especially at the local level. Requests for concrete actions that target the empowerment of Roma in view of becoming political stakeholders were made. In addition, calls were made to stimulate partnership and co-operation between Roma and local authorities.

State officials confirmed their readiness to hold discussions and work towards developing a programme for Roma in Belarus. Initially, there were some hesitations to develop a programme which specifically targets only one ethnic group. Officials claimed that Roma are part of Belarusian society and do not encounter very specific problems. The rationale provided was that Roma are part of 140 ethnic and religious minorities and existing provisions work to keep peace and good interethnic relations in Belarus. The government is cautious not to disrupt the *status quo*. It was also underlined that state authorities provided support for Roma-related activities, such as Roma publications, a festival of Roma culture, and meetings of Roma with local authorities.

Evidence presented by Roma participants, as well as some positive experiences and practices from other countries provides arguments in favor of this initiative. As was acknowledged by one MP, the presentations made by Roma and state officials describe facts and illustrate problems, and these problems need to be addressed. Assistance must be provided and a programme should address the challenges, including providing some support for Roma families.

A process should now unfold in cooperation with Roma representatives. State officials stressed the importance of education and the need to prioritize it in such a programme. This was further supported by another MP who noted that, “six classes for Roma children is like university for a Belarusian youth” and this kind of perception and approach towards education needs to be changed within Roma community. The current school curriculum is so complex that without basic skills introduced to children in pre-school, it is quite difficult for Roma children to meet school requirements. Therefore there is a need to jointly find solutions to all these problems. A governmental programme should work to successfully integrate Roma in Belarusian society.

The ODIHR hopes that there will be a follow-up to this event in Minsk and that efforts to develop a national programme for Belarus’ Roma minority will be realized soon.