



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

## **THE ROMA PEOPLE – A PAN-EUROPEAN CHALLENGE**

address by  
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to the  
**Center of the Diocese of Oslo**

**[Check against delivery]**

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Dear all,

Thank you for the invitation to talk about an issue of relevance to all European governments, namely their relations to the largest minority group in Europe, the Roma. It is a burning issue with regular news reports about Roma being harassed by vigilante groups, non-Roma neighbours and even the authorities.

In Norway, the Roma made the headlines last year. The between 500 and 700 Roma who are Norwegian citizens do make headlines from time to time. The Norwegian Government and municipal authorities, particularly in Oslo, have had various programmes for the Roma, building houses and trying to provide education. However, I believe we have to admit, not with much success. Some of you may have heard an interesting radio documentary two weeks ago about a single Roma mother who had learned to read and write as an adult and desperately wanted to make sure that her children would have a better future. The programme was heartbreaking, as it described her problems both within her own community and her relationship with the majority society, and the tribulations her children now went through in the regular school environment. At the same time, it was heart warming, as it told us how she struggled and succeeded, within her limitations, to create a new future for herself and her children. These individual stories are important as illustrations of the wider situation, namely how Roma are discriminated against and how they struggle to obtain their rights as Norwegian citizens.

What has really made the headlines in Norway over the last few years, however, is not the few Norwegian Roma, but Roma from Central and South Eastern Europe, particularly Romania, who after joining the EU, have been coming to Norway for some weeks or months to beg. Through them, we have also become more aware of the plight of Roma in the rest of Europe.

One could turn today's title around and talk about "Europe – a pan-Roma challenge". What we see in Europe today is not only lack of integration, but an active pursuit of policies that lead to segregation, where governments and local authorities deliberately and systematically exclude and isolate Roma and Roma communities from the rest of society, and where political parties campaign and win votes based on programmes to control and isolate and

outright discriminate against the Roma. Thus, to address the so-called “Roma problem” we also have to address the political culture and climate in Europe.

We do not know the exact number of Roma in Europe, but we talk about between ten and 12 million people that are commonly known as Roma, even though one might find a number of distinctions between them, as some would like to be called Sinti, others Egyptians or Ashkali, and yet others, in fact, prefer to continue to call themselves gypsies.

One reason why we do not know the exact number of Roma is because many countries do not include ethnicity when they organize censuses. Even if they do, many Roma would not like to reveal their ethnicity because they fear discrimination and reprisals from the majority and the authorities. An additional problem is that in some countries, Roma may not have a clear citizenship status and may not even have civic documentation, and, thus, they would not be included in any population register or even in statistics. They simply do not exist.

The dramatic developments in Eastern and Central Europe in the early 1990s also raised public awareness of the plight of the Roma. This was a time when civil society developed and mobilized, and human rights activists and experts worked to alert our societies and leaders to the alarming human rights situation faced by the majority of Roma. As media and civil society have looked into the life of Roma, a socio-economic perspective has been added to the human rights one. A 2003 report by the UNDP presented statistical evidence to support the claims that a significant number of Roma face disproportional challenges in terms of literacy, infant mortality and malnutrition. This study, as well as follow up work done by the Council of Europe, the EU and, not least, civil society groups, has led to an increased focus on policy areas such as employment, education, housing, health and anti-discrimination. The reports and studies have revealed an unfortunate similarity in the patterns of exclusion and marginalization of Roma groups across Europe.

In addition to policy initiatives taken by governments and inter-governmental organizations, a number of actors, both national and regional, have emerged to address these issues. One of the major initiatives taken is the so-called “Decade of Roma Inclusion”. In 2003, nine countries – Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Serbia, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Croatia and Montenegro – signed a declaration pledging that their governments would work towards eliminating discrimination and closing the

unacceptable gaps between Roma and the rest of society. They established a ten-year Action Plan for 2005 to 2015. In 2008, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Spain joined the group. A number of international organizations and non-governmental bodies participate in the work as observers. The principle of “nothing about us without us” sets as a requirement the direct engagement of Roma representatives and organizations.

The Decade is soon coming to an end. Although action plans were established and there is no final evaluation yet, it is unfortunately safe to say that the initiative has not met its expectations and the results so far are meagre. The challenge now is how to build on this initiative, both to keep the relevant countries engaged and to show some results that can give hope to the various Roma communities.

The Council of Europe, a human rights institution that covers 47 European Member States, has also come up with a number of initiatives to address the human rights situation for Roma and the outright discrimination against them. Upon an initiative by the then-President of Finland, Ms. Tarja Halonen, in 2001, the European Roma and Travellers Forum was established. The Forum has representatives from 33 countries, all Roma or Travellers, and enjoys a privileged status with the Council of Europe. Also, the European Committee against Racism and Intolerance has raised specific problems that need to be addressed, as have both the previous and present Commissioners for Human Rights of the Council of Europe. The Council of Europe Secretary General has appointed a Special Representative for Roma Issues to co-ordinate the Council’s work. One specific initiative has been to train mediators to improve Roma access to essential public services, including in the areas of health and education.

Arguably, however, the key contribution of the Council of Europe comes from the European Court of Human Rights. Judgments have identified certain practices of Member States as violations of human rights and discriminatory. These judgments range from lack of proper investigation and response to crimes involving violence against Roma, to the forced sterilization of Roma women and also cases of discrimination in access to quality education. A court decision in 2007 found that disproportionate channelling of Roma children to low-quality education in special schools in the Czech Republic or “practical schools” designed for children with mild mental or physical disabilities constitutes discrimination. Unfortunately, this practice is still ongoing and as late as last week my Institution was

involved in a follow-up mission to ensure that adequate steps are taken to end these practices and that Roma children are included on an equal footing with others in the education system in the Czech Republic. Similar cases of discrimination of Roma in education have been found by the Court in regard to Croatia and Greece, and others are still pending.

Also the European Union has taken a number of steps to address the serious situation among Roma in EU countries. Building on the momentum of the high-level conference in Budapest in 2003 and the increasingly specific evidence regarding the situation of Roma in the EU, including both the UNDP report and robust data gathered by the EU Fundamental Rights Agency, the European Commission started to develop a more comprehensive and systematic approach to addressing the situation of Roma in Europe. A first European Roma Summit was held in September 2008 and led to the creation of the European Platform for Roma Inclusion and the adoption of ten Basic Principles to which Member States have committed. After European Commission communications and follow up work, the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies to 2020 was presented in April 2011 and endorsed by the European Council in June that year. It requires all Member States to develop national strategies for Roma inclusion, and all 27 strategies were assessed by the European Commission in 2012. Similar demands are put on accession countries, with an emphasis on the Western Balkans and Turkey.

In addition to policy co-ordination, the EU has also made available substantial funds for inclusion policies. After assessments showed that available structural funds were underutilized, especially with regard to projects that could make a tangible difference for Roma communities, the European Commission has called attention to the fact that 26.5 billion euros – almost 200 billion Norwegian kroner – is available to support Member States in the period 2007–2013 for social inclusion, including for efforts to tackle the situation of Roma. The challenge of increasing both the absorption capacity and the effective use of the funds by national governments remains, however.

Although these concerted efforts are quite impressive, the situation of Roma in most of Europe is still dire. A report by the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) published in early 2012 on the situation of Roma in 11 EU Member States shows that 90 per cent of Roma live in households with an income below the poverty line, 40 per cent live in households where somebody had to go to bed hungry at least once in the month under review, 45 per cent lack

either indoor kitchens, toilets, showers or baths and electricity. As for employment, the report shows that fewer than one in three Roma are in paid employment and one in three consider themselves unemployed. School attendance varies considerably between EU Member States. On average, one in ten Roma children between the ages of seven and 15 does not attend compulsory schooling and only 15 per cent complete upper-secondary general or vocational education. In Greece, as many as 35 per cent of Roma children in that age range do not attend school. In this context, it may be noteworthy that in the programme on Norwegian radio two weeks ago we were told that only one Roma had completed upper-secondary school since the Roma returned to Norway after WWII.

A more recent FRA report raises serious concerns about the Roma's vulnerability to hate crime compared to other minorities. The report "Minorities as Victims of Crime" indicates that Roma and Sub-Saharan Africans are the two most vulnerable groups in Europe in terms of victimization and in some countries Roma are in a shockingly clear first place. In Greece, more than half of all Roma reported having been a victim of a crime in the past five years, almost half in the Czech Republic and more than a third in Hungary and Poland. As an aggregate group, one out of every ten Roma people reports having been assaulted or threatened with violence within the last 12 months. Of those, 18 per cent perceived that the crime had a racist/ethnic motive, and the figure is much higher in some countries. This indicates that the alarm of rising xenophobia, racist rhetoric and actions is sadly well-founded, and the Roma are at the top of the victim list.

Let me now turn to another international actor – my own organization, the OSCE. Within the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights there is a contact point for Roma and Sinti issues. In Maastricht in 2003, the Foreign Ministers of the then 56 OSCE participating States adopted an Action Plan for Roma and Sinti Issues within the OSCE area. All Institutions, offices and missions of the OSCE should implement the Action Plan and report regularly on their progress.

Also, my own Institution, the High Commissioner on National Minorities, which is tasked to address inter-ethnic relations, is involved in Roma issues. Since my mandate is conflict prevention, and not promotion of human rights, including social rights, there has been an ongoing discussion over the years regarding to what extent Roma issues are within my mandate. I believe they are. As I see it, the exclusion of Roma from mainstream society

could, over time, cause serious social and political strife. That is why I raise the situation of Roma in my bilateral meetings in the countries I visit, whenever it is relevant. Together with other actors, I have also issued reports and made statements.

Still, we have been on the search for areas where we may make a difference, where we have special competencies. Three areas may be the most relevant for me: registration and civic documentation, education and representation.

First, registration and civic documentation. In some countries, in particular in the Balkans, in the former Yugoslav republics, there is a significant number of Roma without identity papers or with old Yugoslav documents that are no longer valid. The lack of recognized identity papers is also a problem for some Roma in Romania. Without up to date and recognized identity papers, children cannot go to school, parents cannot work and there is no access to health services. Together with the EU and the UNHCR, we have set in motion a regional initiative involving governments, local authorities and civil society organizations that reaches out to and facilitates documentation for Roma in the former Yugoslav republics. It started last year and we hope that we may see some concrete improvements later this year.

Second, education. In my work on inter-ethnic relations and conflict prevention, I see how important education is. Access to quality education for all is essential as a *sine qua non* for participation in the labour force and, indeed, society overall. Education can be a way to bridge gaps and bring different ethnic groups together, or it may be used to reinforce stereotypes and cement differences. In many of the countries I work in, the latter is unfortunately the case. As we know, many countries set up special classes for Roma children, ostensibly to provide more suitable teaching for children who may be less well prepared for school; for instance, since they may not have attended pre-school. We also know, however, that this provides a lower-quality education, and that this practice will only result in further alienation and isolation of these children and further complicate their full participation in society. As recently as the 1980s, there were separate classes for Roma children in Oslo. According to reports, the results were far from optimal, with few children learning basic skills, such as reading and writing.

The third area is representation. Who speaks on behalf of the Roma? Can we facilitate a process leading to some kind of representative but also inclusive bodies that may act on

behalf of the Roma while recognizing the internal pluralism of the groups concerned? In some countries where I work, a system of minority councils has been introduced. These are elected bodies that represent an ethnic group on questions of culture, language and education in discussions with national and local authorities. Some members of the Roma community have suggested that we initiate a process towards establishing a Roma representative body, drawing inspiration from the Sami Parliament, creating a body that would represent the Roma in all major matters of culture in its broadest sense. This would no doubt be meaningful, but unfortunately I am afraid it is not realistic in most countries. However, it is not entirely impossible. Serbia has established a Roma National Minority Council together with similar councils for other ethnic groups. This council has a broad mandate with respect to culture, including language and education. Based on lessons from Serbia's experience, it may be an idea to try to introduce similar bodies in other countries with a view to enhancing effective participation.

With all these resolutions, strategies and action plans, and available money, why is so little achieved? Why is it so difficult to address the issues pertaining to Roma inclusion in a way that could show results and have an impact?

I believe there are many reasons, and they are to some degree country-specific. However, some similarities exist. If we look at the question from a Roma perspective, we should remember that Roma have lived on the fringes of society as long as they have lived in Europe. Their culture has always been distinct from the majority culture. However, with industrialization and modernization, the differences have grown even bigger than what we had in traditional rural societies in earlier times. Then Roma skills and services were in demand, and few members of the majority society could read and write.

Also, many Roma communities are very patriarchal, particularly with respect to their attitudes towards women and girls. There are even reports alleging that some Roma leaders have an interest in keeping their "flock" at the margins of society in order to better control it. Since members of the Roma community most frequently relate to the majority via the police or other authorities that they see as aiming to punish them, there is no incentive for closer co-operation with the majority. While other ethnic minorities often have neighbouring States where their ethnic group are in the majority and from where they can receive support,



Roma have no such assistance from neighbours. This makes Roma even more vulnerable than other ethnic minorities.

Many – if not most – governments and local authorities look upon Roma only as a problem and there is no desire to make an effort to include them. Because of international and national pressure from international organizations and civil society, some initiatives are reluctantly taken, but more in the form of elaborating strategies and action plans than putting sufficient effort into actual implementation. There are no votes to win from a platform of Roma inclusion. On the contrary, actions to discriminate against Roma unfortunately gather quite some support these days.

What happens with all the EU money that has been made available? A lot of money seems to be unspent because countries are having problems absorbing the funds. In many cases, the EU is financing up to 80 per cent of a project and the government needs to supply the rest. In an interview with *The Economist* last September, Mr. Gelu Duminica, head of a foundation that supports the integration and development of the Roma community in Romania, said five of their programmes that are financed through the EU were suspended because the Romanian Government did not make payments: *“The situation is desperate. Some of our staff had to make personal bank loans so we could continue to finance these programmes. If the Government does not make the payments by February next year – which means soon – we will lose all the money and shut down the foundation.”* Mr. Duminica believes corruption and bureaucracy are the main causes for this delay. He goes on to say that Romania will be haunted by this societal problem for the foreseeable future if action is not taken now.

So what can be done? It is unnecessary to state that there is no easy answer and no-one-size-fits-all solution. However, the situation for Roma has to be addressed. It will not go away and it will not solve itself. Since most Roma are citizens of a State, it is up to the relevant government to take responsible actions. History and reality show that little happens and that governments tend to close their eyes as long as Roma do not make headlines or cause problems for those in power.

However, for those governments ready to act, there are some principles that I do believe could guide us:

1. Governments have to recognize that Roma belong to distinct ethnic groups with their own culture and should be treated accordingly. Only by such recognition will it be possible to build trust.
2. Governments have to make it unequivocally clear that violence and discrimination against Roma are unacceptable and will be severely punished. Only through a clear attitude will it be possible to stop such actions.
3. Governments should proactively make sure that all Roma have the necessary documentation to benefit from all social services. This should be done in consultation with Roma organizations.
4. Governments should strive to work with the Roma community to find ways of developing a system of representation for Roma vis-à-vis the authorities, while ensuring that this representation is inclusive and pluralistic.
5. Governments should work hand-in-hand with the Roma community to make sure that all children are enrolled in, attend and graduate from schools, at least for compulsory education.
6. Roma children should be included in ordinary schools. Teachers may be given some extra training, tasks and thus compensation to work with Roma children to make sure that they receive quality education.
7. Governments may consider special measures to secure Roma participation in work and public life. As with for instance African Americans and women before, there is a need for role models and they may only be available through active encouragement and empowerment, possibly through targets or even some quotas to ensure affirmative action to increase Roma participation.
8. Governments should take systematic steps to put in place measures to increase capacity to absorb EU funds and to fight corruption also in the Roma programmes. Reports seem to indicate that corruption among government and local officials is a serious problem that hampers efficient implementation of Roma programmes, in addition to the lack of capacity.

The gap between Europe's Roma population and the authorities and majorities in Europe seems to be increasing rather than diminishing. That is why it is so urgent to take action. We do not need more conferences and studies of the situation for Roma. Authorities may pick up

and read studies already done. All studies point in the same direction: very little efficient work is carried out by the authorities and the negative attitude among the majority against Roma is increasing. It is the responsibility of the authorities to address this. They have to take the first steps to bridge the gap. It is urgent. What today are human rights violations and social problems may turn into more serious societal conflict if not properly addressed.

Thank you.