

**Combating Racism and Intolerance against Roma and Sinti remains a Challenge  
throughout the OSCE Area**

**Session 3**

**Presentation of the OSCE ODIHR Senior Adviser on Roma and Sinti at the OSCE High-Level  
Conference on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination, 28-30 June Astana, Kazakhstan 2010**

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

The human rights situation of Roma and Sinti has been recognized as a matter of serious concern in the OSCE area as early as in 1990 and since then participating States repeatedly addressed it in various OSCE commitments and documents. The OSCE Action Plan adopted in Maastricht in 2003 called for effective eradication of discrimination against Roma and Sinti. To date, little progress has been made with regard to combating racism and intolerance against Roma and Sinti. In some participating States tensions and intolerance against Roma and Sinti have reportedly escalated. The scapegoating of Roma and Sinti by populist politicians and institutionalized discrimination are continuing problems. The situation has in some cases been further complicated by discourse in some countries about the migration of Roma and Sinti in Europe, which has in turn been affected by the economic and financial crisis.

The annual Hate Crime Report published by ODIHR regularly contains information about biased crimes and incidents against Roma and Sinti in the OSCE region. Whereas official state monitoring of hate crimes against Roma and Sinti in the OSCE region is very limited, NGOs and the media regularly report on many specific incidents against this minority in a number of countries.

I would like to recall a couple of most recent cases of intolerance and discrimination against Roma and Sinti as illustrative examples:

In late 2008 and the first half of 2009, a series of violent incidents took place in one participating State that resulted in the deaths of several Roma and the injury of numerous others. In connection to 9 cases which resulted in deaths of 6 Roma a group of perpetrators were caught in August 2009; the attacks were allegedly ethnically motivated, as police suspects.

In March 2009 a group of policemen in a city in another participating State abused six Roma boys aged 11 to 16. The boys, who had been arrested on suspicion of robbery, were taken to a police station and were forced to punch each other and strip naked as they were surrounded by officers and dogs. Several of them also suffered bite wounds when the police set dogs on them.

In the night of 18 April 2009, perpetrators threw three Molotov cocktails into a house in a town in a third participating State where nine Roma people lived. A two-year-old child suffered 2nd and 3rd degree burns to 80 percent of her body, the parents suffered lighter

burns. The little girl's grandmother running out of the house set on fire saw a leaving with someone shouting "Burn, gypsies" before driving off.

On 31 May 2009, in a fourth participating State, a conflict broke out in a town between the Roma community and another ethnic minority community that resulted in damaging the houses and other property of about 40 Roma families and forcing them to live for weeks in the nearby woods. In July 2009, in another location of the same participating State Roma were forced to sign a "protocol on cohabitation" imposing a series of conditions by the local authorities.

Just last week police had to offer protection to the entire Roma community of a village, in a fifth participating State where for days several hundred non-Roma villagers gathered in the areas where Roma residents live as protest following the murder of a 17-year-old boy allegedly committed by a Roma teenager. Five persons suspected of spreading racial and ethnic hatred have been arrested.

In December MC Decision No. 8/09 in Athens the OSCE Ministerial Council expressed concern over the increase of violent manifestations of intolerance against Roma and Sinti and urged the participating States to address this trend as well as to unequivocally and publicly condemn any violence targeting Roma and Sinti and to take all necessary measures to ensure access to effective remedies.<sup>1</sup> The essential role free and independent media can play both in countering as well as exacerbating misperceptions and prejudices was also recognized. This Ministerial Council decision was a timely response to the increase in the reported violent and hate-motivated incidents targeting members of the Roma and Sinti communities in the OSCE region.

ODIHR, within its mandate and capacities, also responded to this worrying trend. In February 2009 ODIHR issued a press release expressing concern over the continuing attacks and hate speech targeting Roma and Sinti communities in several countries across Europe.<sup>2</sup>

Concerned with the human rights situation of Roma and Sinti in Italy, the ODIHR conducted a field assessment visit to that country in 2008.<sup>3</sup> It did the same with regard to

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<sup>1</sup>The Ministerial Council tasks in particular ODIHR, in co-operation and co-ordination with the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM), the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media and other relevant OSCE executive structures to continue to assist participating States to combat acts of discrimination and violence against Roma and Sinti, and to counter negative stereotyping of Roma and Sinti in the media taking into account relevant OSCE freedom of the media commitments.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.osce.org/item/36548.html>

<sup>3</sup> The delegation was joined by representatives of the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights, the Italian National Office against Racial Discrimination (UNAR), and an Italian non-governmental organization. During the last two days of the visit, the delegation was joined by the Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office on Combating Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination. The report of the field visit is accessible at: <http://www.osce.org/odihr/18148.html>

the situation of Roma in Hungary in 2009.<sup>4</sup> The assessment report together with recommendations was released recently.<sup>5</sup>

In order to raise awareness to the extremist manifestations of racism, intolerance and hate-motivated violence against Roma in Europe and to analyze its potential threat to social cohesion and security, ODIHR supported the organization of a conference on “Extremism and the Roma and Sinti in Europe: Challenges, Risks and Responses” in London in September 2009.

Finally I would like to highlight one area where Roma and Sinti are being systemically discriminated in several OSCE states and which has a devastating impact on their integration opportunities. This area is education. ODIHR is concerned about overrepresentation of children in special education. Governments are aware how such a practice is harmful to this community. Yet not much has been done to challenge it, despite rulings of the European Court of Human Rights on this issue against some countries. In 2008, the OSCE participating States committed themselves to provide for equal access to education and to promote early education for Roma and Sinti children as an instrument to prevent this practice (Helsinki MC Decision 6/08).

It is a devastating practice for Roma and Sinti community if we realize it affects over a quarter of children in some participating States. It’s discriminatory and socially and economically costly. We urge governments to dismantle this practice as a matter of urgency.

Owing to the current socio-economic situation of Roma and Sinti – their continued lack of integration and dependence on social welfare - coupled with the overall financial crisis they tend to become a subject for scapegoating for all kinds of social evils. The violence against Roma and Sinti often happens in an atmosphere of open hate-speech, somehow tolerated or unchecked by the mainstream. Moreover, such rhetoric with a clear anti-Roma stance works in some cases to garner public support, especially during the elections. Media reporting often plays a central role in reproducing and disseminating anti-Roma prejudices, some of which are capable of inciting tension between Roma and non-Roma communities. Proliferation and increase in such acts, if unabated, can result not only in further discrimination of this minority group but also endanger the social cohesion and peace in the society. A strong and unequivocal stance against this trend is therefore urgently needed.

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<sup>4</sup> The visiting delegation also included representatives of the OSCE HCNM, the OSCE’s Strategic Police Matters Unit and the Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office on Combating Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination.

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.osce.org/documents/odihhr/2010/06/44569\\_en.pdf](http://www.osce.org/documents/odihhr/2010/06/44569_en.pdf)