Rating action on Roma rights

Keeping track of progress

Five years since the OSCE participating States adopted a wide-ranging action plan to tackle discrimination and prejudice against Roma and Sinti, the prescribed measures are as vital as ever, says Andrzej Mirga, the OSCE's key official responsible for Roma and Sinti issues. In an interview with Jens-Hagen Eschenbaecher, Spokesperson of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), Mr. Mirga discusses why implementation is lagging behind good intentions and why a genuine breakthrough remains elusive. The interview took place ahead of the European Union's first summit addressing problems faced by Roma, held in Brussels in mid-September.

ODIHR/JENS ESCHENBAECHER

Jens-Hagen Eschenbaecher: In the past few months, a number of articles in the international press have presented a gloomy picture of the plight of Roma and Sinti in Europe. The *Economist*, for example, described the latest social indicators on Roma as "shocking". Do you share this assessment?

Andrzej Mirga: I don't have any serious disagreement with the analysis. Everyone knows that in most countries, the gap between Roma and the majority population in practically all aspects of life is still enormous. A status report just published by ODIHR makes this clear. Discrimination and exclusion still characterize the lives of most Roma and Sinti today. They are constantly confronted with racist violence and hatred, unemployment, poverty, illiteracy and high infant mortality.

But the picture is not entirely bleak. There is much more awareness of the problems today than there was just a few years ago. New laws and policies have been adopted. In many countries, funding to support the integration of Roma has gone up significantly.

Did the creation of the OSCE's Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues almost 15 years ago play a role in heightening awareness?

In fact, the creation of the Contact Point in 1994 within ODIHR was historic in itself. It was the first time an international organization set up a structure devoted exclusively to Roma and Sinti issues. The OSCE was among the first to

recognize this community's specific problems, which had taken a turn for the worse in the late 1980s and early 1990s after the fall of communism and during the conflicts in Yugoslavia.

Another milestone was the adoption of the OSCE Action Plan on Roma and Sinti at the Ministerial Council meeting in Maastricht in 2003. The plan, drawn up in close consultation with Roma representatives, was considered a major achievement. It provides governments with guidance in developing strategies and lays out clear objectives aimed at improving the lives of members of Roma and Sinti communities in the OSCE area.

Since then, there has been no shortage of good intentions to carry out the detailed recommendations. But, clearly, that is not enough. What is crucial now is to continue strengthening the political will to implement the plan in earnest.

Why do you think there has been so little progress in integrating Roma and Sinti into the mainstream of society?

There are many reasons, and the answer depends on the specific context. In some countries, Roma issues figured on the political agenda relatively late — unfortunately often only when tensions were threatening to escalate into violence or a situation had reached boiling point.

In other countries, the sheer numbers of Roma and the scale of the problems have militated against quick and easy solutions. Effective integration requires considerable financial investment — and we know how difficult it is in some countries to rally political support for public funding to benefit a minority that faces widespread discrimination and prejudice.

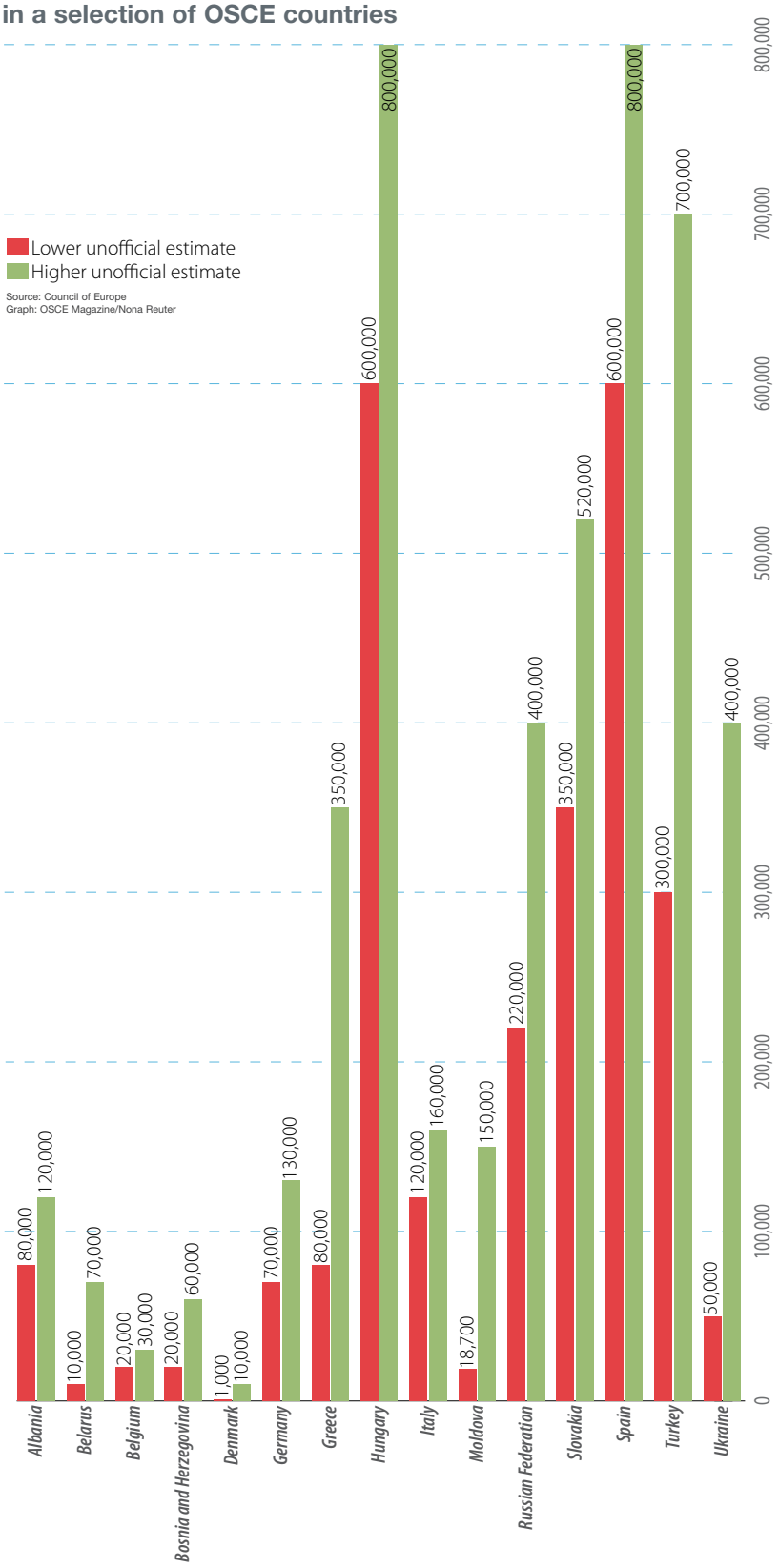
One area where we *are* seeing visible progress and positive change is, as I said, in the development and adoption of national strategies. However, there has been less success in translating these strategies into meaningful action.

Finland, Hungary, Montenegro, Poland, Slovenia and Spain are among the countries that have made tangible steps forward; they have adopted clear mechanisms for financing and programme implementation. In Hungary and Romania, elite groups of well-educated Roma have emerged. They are playing a dynamic role in parliaments, in public administration, and in policy-making on Roma matters.

Hungary has ensured the availability of substantial funds for Roma-related programmes. Similarly, Poland has committed about €3 million for concrete activities every year for a ten-year period. Montenegro is earmarking 0.2 per cent of its annual budget for its Roma strategy; this year, it adds up to €400,000. These are encouraging developments that we can build on.

Whether their total number is closer to 8 million or 12 million, Roma and Sinti and other groups such as Travellers and Gypsies make up the largest minority population in the OSCE area. Comprising a rich and diverse palette of ethnic, linguistic and cultural communities, they are believed to have migrated from the Indian subcontinent between the ninth and fourteenth centuries. Because of their long history of persecution and personal experience of blatant discrimination or outright hatred, many Roma have been reluctant to declare their ethnic identity. This is reflected in the wide disparities in unofficial estimates of the Roma population in a sample of OSCE countries. Romania, not included in the graph below, has the largest Roma and Sinti community, estimated at between 1.2 million and 2.5 million.

Estimated (unofficial) Roma and Sinti populations in a selection of OSCE countries



OSCE/SAMIR ALIC

OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Regional Centre in Tuzla, 2007. Outstanding Roma students are interviewed on FTV (Federal BiH Television) on International Roma Day (8 April).

The challenges posed by the migration of Roma from south-eastern to western Europe have been at the centre of controversy in some western capitals. How should governments be responding?

Roma are not the only ones moving west. Since the opening of borders following the end of the Cold War, and as the EU has expanded, millions of people from central, eastern and south-eastern Europe have been moving westwards to seek better job opportunities and improve their lives. Although Roma are only a small part of this phenomenon, they are more visible and tend to migrate not as individuals, but with their families.

Of course any migration movement needs to be managed, but it has to be done on the basis of the rule of law and international standards. Issuing alarmist statements and introducing measures such as a state of emergency hardly contribute to the search for constructive solutions.

Speaking of solutions, is the media doing its share to avoid being part of the problem?

The media is often blamed for stereotyping and inciting tensions between Roma and the majority population. No doubt there are negative examples, but I think it is wrong to generalize. We also have to ask ourselves: Who is giving the media ammunition? Often, we find that it is politicians who are exploiting the presence of Roma in a populist manner for political gain.

There have always been myths surrounding the Roma community. Which specific ones should be forcefully dispelled?

One of the most common is that Roma have a propensity to commit crime. I have heard the most incredible exaggerations concerning crime rates among Roma. I am not saying that Roma never break the law, but that we should be careful about blanket statements that contribute to the criminalization of Roma in general.

Andrzej Mirga assumed the position of Senior Adviser on Roma and Sinti Issues in 2007, succeeding Nicolae Gheorghe who served from 1999 to 2006. He heads the OSCE's Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues in the OSCE's Warsaw-based Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR).

Mr. Mirga, 54, was born in the small Roma settlement of Czarna Gora in Poland to Polish Roma parents. He was the first Roma student at Krakow's Jagiellonian University, specializing in ethnography. After teaching there from 1981 to 1992, he decided to devote his time and energy to activities on behalf of Poland's Roma community and to undertake further studies in Roma culture and society.

Since then, he has held various senior positions in several international Roma organizations and advisory bodies. As chairman of the Association of Roma in Poland, he served as a mediator between the Roma community and the Government after violence broke out against Roma in the town of Mlawa in 1991. During his 14 years with the Project on Ethnic Relations, an international NGO based in Princeton, New Jersey, he testified several times in the U.S. Congress on the situation of Roma in central and south-eastern Europe.

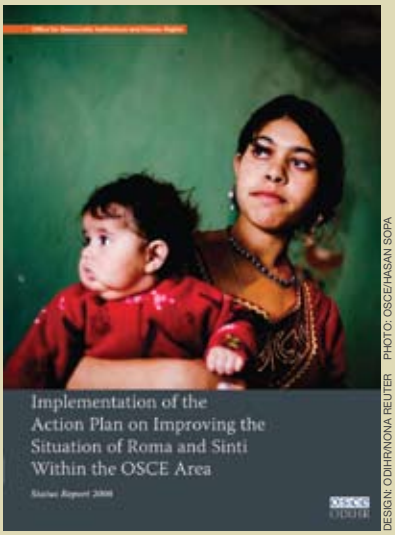
Mr. Mirga has written and lectured extensively on Roma matters. He taught at Rutgers in New Brunswick, New Jersey, for three academic years between 1999 and 2001. He and Nicolae Gheorghe wrote "The Roma in the Twenty-First Century. A Policy Paper", for the Project on Ethnic Relations, Princeton, 1997.

Roma Action Plan: The Contact Point and the OSCE as catalysts and active agents

Beyond providing advice to governments, serving as a clearing house for best practices and expertise, and supporting initiatives of civil society, the Contact Point for Roma and Sinti issues within ODIHR also carries out specific programmes and projects, often in co-operation with field operations and other OSCE institutions such as the High Commissioner on National Minorities.

In 2007, these activities focused on combating racism and discrimination, drawing Roma and Sinti closer to the electoral process, ensuring that their fundamental rights are respected in crisis and post-crisis situations, and co-operating with other organizations to combat trafficking as it affects Roma and Sinti populations.

Much of the work of the Contact Point aims at assisting governments and NGOs to implement the *Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti within the OSCE Area*. Five years after the plan was adopted by the OSCE Ministerial Council meeting in Maastricht in 2003, ODIHR recently issued its detailed status report (see cover, right) examining how participating States have fared in carrying out the plan. The report also looks at the roles of the Contact Point, other OSCE institutions and field operations as catalysts and as active agents for the realization of the plan's recommendations. **www.osce.org/odihr**



DESIGN: ODIHR/NONA REUTER PHOTO: OSCE/HASAN SOPA

Crimes are committed by individuals, not by communities.

Another popular myth is that Roma do not care about education. This argument conveniently places the blame on Roma themselves for their plight and ignores how difficult it is for Roma families to break out of the vicious circle of isolation, extreme poverty and illiteracy.

I should add that we don't hear enough about positive examples of individual Roma who have attained success in business, in academia, in the arts and as professionals. They, too, exist.

So what else is needed to finally make some headway? After all, the OSCE has its Action Plan, several organizations have also taken up Roma and Sinti causes, more funding is available from the EU and others, legislation and policies are in place across the region, and there is an active NGO community.

If we want to achieve any genuine breakthroughs, the different international actors should co-ordinate more closely, especially in defining the areas that need attention most urgently. We already have a good number of comprehensive plans and programmes, but the action taken is often sporadic and piecemeal, limited in scope, and insufficiently funded. As a result, it has no lasting impact.

One strategic priority is education, especially pre-school education, which contributes significantly to a child's performance in school. We have to make sure that the next generation of Roma is sufficiently fit and prepared to progress through the educational system. Education opens many doors: It provides access to jobs, a way out of exclusion and the means to lessen discrimination.

Of course this will require a significant flow of investments, as I said, but the rise of a new generation of economically self-reliant and socially engaged Roma will benefit everyone. With its unique instruments — its specialized institutions and field operations — the OSCE is especially well placed to make an important contribution.

Is this vision of integration not at odds with the wish to preserve Roma culture and traditions?

Not at all. This is another myth, and one that is perpetuated by some Roma. Integration does not mean loss of identity. Identities change over time; they can be redefined and reshaped. As the world around us changes, we cannot go through life pretending that we are not affected. Certain professions, traditions and lifestyles may simply not be able to survive in a rapidly developing world. This is a normal process. The future of Roma culture does not lie in isolation. We need to forge a new and modern Roma identity — one that shows that we are striving to live to our fullest potential and are enjoying the same rights and opportunities as the rest of the population.

ODIHR/DAN DOGHI

City Hall, Rome, 25 June 2008. The human rights situation of Roma and Sinti in Italy is the focus of discussions between the Mayor of Rome, Giovanni Alemanno (right), and Andrzej Mirga, who heads ODIHR's Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues. Representatives of the office of the High Commissioner on National Minorities also took part in the field visit to Italy.

Roma pre-schoolers emerge from the shadow of the Gazela bridge

BY MARIA DOTSENKO

Wide-eyed Bajram says he wants to be a pilot when he grows up so he can take his friends on an airplane ride around the world. But the six-year-old knows how to set his priorities: "First, I need to learn how to add and subtract."

Eleven-year-old Sladjana is the oldest pupil in her class but she doesn't mind. "It's never too late to start studying," she says. "Every day for five hours I learn so many new things and I'm also making friends."

Sladjana says her mother and father never went to school and could not understand why she should. Didn't it make more sense for their daughter to supplement the meagre family income?

"But now," Sladjana adds, "I can read out newspaper articles to them and that makes them very proud. This has encouraged me to go on to the next level — primary school!"

Bajram and Sladjana both live under the Gazela bridge in the heart of Belgrade, along with about 1,000 other Roma, including refugees from Kosovo and returnees from western Europe. Despite their wide age gap, the two youngsters found themselves enrolled together in pre-school classes in April this year as part of an OSCE pilot project supported by the city of Belgrade, Spain and the European Agency for Reconstruction.

To draw out the shy pupils and those who felt awkward using the Serbian language, a Romani-speaker was available in each class, ready to assist non-Roma teachers every time children needed someone to explain the Serbian alphabet and basic numbers in their mother tongue. Support also came in the form of bus transportation, clothes and shoes, and hygienic items.

Four months later, in July, Bajram and Sladjana completed their first formal schooling, along with 79 other Roma children between six and twelve years old. "These kids now have the basic abilities and social skills needed to start primary school," says Jovanka Stojić, director of one of the three schools that hosted the classes.

The OSCE Mission and the City of Belgrade are working closely to ensure that parents can enrol their children in the local school of their choice. Meanwhile, the Norwegian Embassy has announced its financial support for two Roma teachers' assistants, textbooks and other school supplies.

BETTER DAYS

This first crop of pre-school graduates may not realize it, but they are a harbinger of better days to come for many of the 280 children in the

Roma children of various ages from the Gazela settlement are brought together in pre-school classes in the Branko Pešić School in Belgrade's Zemun municipality. Photo: OSCE/Milan Obradović

Gazela settlement. About 133 families — out of a total of about 237 — are expected to move to the outskirts of Belgrade, into individual prefabricated houses paid for by the city.

The OSCE Mission to Serbia played a significant advisory role in the comprehensive relocation plan, working closely with city authorities and Roma leaders to ensure that residents would be integrated into the socio-economic fabric of their new surroundings. This task emerged from the Mission's long-standing work on behalf of the country's Roma, which includes a €2 million programme funded by the European Agency for Reconstruction.

As anyone familiar with Belgrade knows, the Gazela community has long been crying out for a means of breaking its vicious cycle of poverty and marginalization. It is the largest and most visible of the city's 150 informal Roma settlements. Families live cheek by jowl in 250 ramshackle dwellings in sub-human conditions within an area of hardly half a square kilometre.

Close by, railroad tracks connect the international rail service to the main railway station. Overhead, tens of thousands of vehicles traverse the *Most Gazela*, which serves as a principal road into the centre and is part of a key transit artery for the region. The bridge itself is in urgent need of upgrading, but the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development will only make its funds available for the start of the massive reconstruction works when the residents below are resettled.

"We have taken full advantage of our close ties with the Roma community and of the domestic partnerships we have built up over the years," says OSCE staff member Matthew Newton, who manages the Roma Assistance Programme. "Prior to this, whole settlements were moved without much thought being given to residents' rights of access to health, education and employment opportunities and services. This time around, if everything goes well, Serbia's other Roma settlements will be able to look to the Gazela plan as a model."

RIGHT ON THE MARK

Given the dismal statistics — 60 per cent of Serbia's Roma have not completed primary school and more than 35 per cent are illiterate — the OSCE's assistance programme is right on the mark, with most of it being targeted on education. The strategy seeks to increase the number of Roma children in primary schools by employing Roma teachers' assistants, a practice adapted from Hungary and introduced in Serbia by the Education Ministry in 2006 with the support of the OSCE Mission.

So far, the programme has hired and trained 54 Romani-speaking people, most of whom have some experience in NGO work, with the OSCE and the Education Ministry initially sharing the costs of salaries. The aim is to expand the pool of qualified assistants, to continue training them and to develop their positions into stable and well-defined jobs.

OSCE/MILAN OBRADOVIC

Teacher Ivana Radojević with her pupils from the Roma community below the Gazela bridge.

"It's easy to see why this approach works," says Ivana Radojević, teacher of six-year-old Bajram. "The teachers' assistants share the same language, the same culture and the same background as the pupils' parents. When Bajram's parents, for example, could not see much point in his going to pre-school, he asked the Roma teacher's assistant to talk to them. Bajram turned out to be one of the most active pupils. In fact, his enthusiasm was so infectious that his elder brother later joined the class."

Beyond the classroom, teachers' assistants keep in close touch with Roma families through regular visits in settlements and informal meetings at school to explore solutions to some of the problems faced by parents. The hope is that these exchanges will lead to workshops where Roma women can be taught to read and write, and be given information on their special needs as wives and mothers.

"The Roma teachers' assistants are able to present themselves to parents as proof that education holds the key to a better life," says Ms. Radojević.

Matthew Newton, who spent 12 years in the region working on return and integration issues, is encouraged by the promising start of the pre-school scheme in the Gazela slums. "It shows that Roma communities are willing to integrate and that for programmes to succeed, they should be sensitive to cultural diversity and be aware that mutual mistrust runs deep. And of course, firm political and financial backing is absolutely essential."

Maria Dotsenko is Head of Press and Public Information in the OSCE Mission to Serbia.

Trained mediators open up a healthier world for Serbia's Roma

BY MARIA DOTSENKO

Sladjana Stanković had been living in Belgium for three years when she decided to return to her native Serbia, hoping to make a difference in the Roma community. When she heard that the Health Ministry was looking for Roma women who could serve as "health mediators" within their own municipalities, she knew this was her chance.

Once on the job at the health centre in Palilula, Belgrade's biggest municipality, she wasn't quite sure how much of an impact she could make — until she got to know a Roma couple with ten children.

"No one in the family had any identification papers," she relates. "The woman had lost track of her children's birth dates. Not a single one had been immunized against childhood diseases. A nurse at the health centre told me that the woman refused to let her even see her children."

On one of her regular visits to the settlement, Ms. Stanković spent several hours with the family talking about the importance of proper health care. They were surprised to hear that they could apply for a wide range of social services if they had the proper documents.

"I am proud and pleased that all the children have now been vaccinated and their mother has started using contraceptives," she says. "Recently, their neighbours asked me if I could provide them with similar help as well."

As their name implies, health mediators, who speak Romani, act as a bridge between public health staff and Roma communities. They visit families, assisting them to apply for national health cards and talking to women about their rights and about immunization programmes, basic hygiene and reproductive health issues. A trusting relationship is easily fostered because the mediator comes from the same municipality.

In the process, a whole new world opens up for families, Ms. Stanković says. "As you know, life is tough for Roma. Sometimes everyone in the household is illiterate. Disease is rampant, since illegal settlements often have no running water or sewage facilities. People feel abandoned; they don't believe that the State can help them. Women and children are the most vulnerable. They are easy prey for traffickers and criminals."

Sladjana Stanković was among the first 15 women to be hired and trained as health mediators in 2007 under the Roma Assistance Programme of the OSCE Mission to Serbia.

"It's a truly collaborative venture with the Health Ministry, the Roma National Council and the Roma National Strategy Secretariat," says Lazar Divjak, project assistant in the OSCE Mission. "The Health Ministry handles recruitment. It publicizes vacancy notices widely, on Roma

Palilula municipality, Belgrade. Roma Sladjana Stanković (left) visits Roma families regularly as part of her work as a health mediator and also serves as a role model. Photo: OSCE/Milan Obradović

radio for example, and pays the salaries. Roma community representatives take part in every aspect of planning and implementation."

The OSCE is responsible for training, which is funded by the European Agency for Reconstruction. Topics focus on basic health care, human rights, legal and social assistance, and communication and advocacy work. After an initial training course lasting up to four days, the continuing education of health mediators is assured through courses held twice a month.

"This is the first activity of its kind in Serbia and the results are clearly visible after just one year," says Dubravka Šaranović Račić, an adviser in the Health Ministry. "In the first 15 municipalities with a health mediator, including south Serbia, the number of immunized Roma children has gone up and women have started taking better care of their special health needs."

Ms. Račić was part of a small group that visited Bucharest last December to find out what Romania was doing effectively in this area. "It's a concept that has been working there very well for some time now," she says. "With the help of the OSCE Mission and the Romanian Government, we were able to build good contacts with the health authorities and learned a lot from them."

One crucial mistake that the Romanians made initially, which their counterparts in Serbia are not about to repeat, was the use of male health mediators. "In the Roma culture, it is not appropriate to discuss reproductive health care issues with men," Ms. Račić explains.

"We're trying to learn from others because we know that, apart from our own political commitment to this initiative, the key to its sustainability is the support of the Roma community," she continues. "We hope to add 15 mediators in 2009 and another 15 in 2010. We plan to expand the programme until the Roma community is fully integrated into the health system."

When that day comes, Roma health mediators will be ready to move on as assistant nurses in municipal health centres, thus filling a glaring gap in Roma personnel in Serbia's public health system.

The role of health mediators, after all, is not to create permanent "ghettos" of services, as some critics fear might happen, but simply to break through the barriers that block thousands of Roma from exercising their basic human right to medical and social care.

OSCE/MILAN OBRADOVIĆ

Roma health mediators reach out to mothers and educate them on how to obtain help for their special needs.

Getting to know the Roma community in Serbia

Promoting the rights and improving the welfare of Roma in Serbia — estimated by the Council of Europe to be as high as 450,000, or about 6 per cent of the population — has always been a key aspect of the activities of the OSCE Mission to Serbia.

But the close working relationship between the Roma community and the OSCE Mission did not just happen overnight. "Our mutual trust and confidence has been nurtured over the years. This is why we are able to keep building on our joint achievements, which have been backed by the Government's commitment," says Head of Mission Hans Ola Urstad.

The creation of the Roma National Strategy Secretariat in 2004 was among the initiatives supported by the Mission and was to prove a significant step in institution-building. It also paved the way for the OSCE's Roma Assistance Programme, which received €2 million funding from the European Agency for Reconstruction.

The Mission also helped shape Serbia's national action plans for Roma, focusing on the four priority areas of the Decade of Roma Inclusion — education, employment, health and housing.

The Roma Decade 2005 to 2015 is an "unprecedented political commitment" by governments in central and south-eastern Europe to improving the socio-economic status of Roma. The Decade's founders include the Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues within the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, the World Bank, and the Open Society Institute.

Ambassador Urstad notes that Serbia took over the Decade's one-year presidency from Hungary last July. "We hope that Serbia and our Roma partners will take this opportunity to showcase the results of our joint efforts, including adapting good practices from others," he says. "The two activities that we chose to highlight in this issue of the *OSCE Magazine* describe how we applied the experiences of Hungary and Romania to Serbia's situation."

www.osce.org/serbia

OSCE/MILAN OBRADOVIĆ

Mladenovac, Belgrade, 16 October 2007. Ambassador Hans Ola Urstad hands out schoolbags and supplies to Roma children as part of the OSCE's efforts to improve their access to education.

MAX VAN DER STOEL AWARD

Fighting for justice

Dynamic rights group serves as legal lifeline for Roma

BY DZAVIT BERISA

The news that the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) had been awarded the Max van der Stoel Award for 2007 for its "extraordinary and outstanding achievements" caught me and my 22 colleagues completely by surprise. We were delighted and excited, but above all proud of what the award signified: Just 12 years after its foundation in 1996, the ERRC had earned a place among the leading human rights organizations "aimed at improving the position of national minorities in the OSCE participating States".

At the award ceremony on 16 October 2007 at Het Spaansche Hof, an imposing palace in The Hague, Knut Vollebaek, the OSCE's recently appointed High Commissioner on National Minorities, paid tribute to the ERRC's "long-term commitment to combating discrimination against Roma and its laudable efforts to attract attention to this pressing problem facing Europe as a whole".

We were pleased to learn that our combination of grassroots activism, extensive research, and national and international advocacy had impressed the international jury. I believe that it is in fact these ingredients that have helped us to convince policymakers and NGOs that Roma should not be regarded solely as a social problem but as individuals and groups that are systematically discriminated against. This shift in mindset is, in its turn, making itself felt in policies and strategies that have slowly moved away from social welfare to rights-based measures aimed at counteracting discrimination and promoting equal treatment.

We decided to use part of the €50,000 prize money to help finance the assignment of a qualified local person to monitor the Roma situation in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, where we are strengthening our efforts to oppose segregated education. In doing so, we aim to build on an important victory won by the ERRC at the European Court of Human Rights in November 2007. I am referring to a case we took up in 1998 on behalf of 18 Romani children from the Czech city of Ostrava who had unjustifiably been placed in schools for the mentally disabled.

IMMENSE POSSIBILITIES

My own personal story serves as a living testimony to the impact of the ERRC's advocacy and grassroots work — and to the immense possibilities that still lie ahead.

In June 1999, shortly after the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, my wife Bojlie and I were forced to abandon our home in Kosovo. One day in September, after almost three months of being displaced within Kosovo itself, we — and about 500 other Roma — took a risk and walked

The Hague, 16 October 2007, Max van der Stoel Award 2007 ceremony. Left to right: OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities Knut Vollebaek; Dzavit Berisa, the author; Foreign Minister of the Netherlands Maxime Verhagen, who presented the award; Vera Egenberger, former EERC Executive Director; Dutch diplomat Max van der Stoel, the first High Commissioner (1993–2001), in whose honour the award was established by the Netherlands Foreign Ministry in 2001; and his successor, Swedish diplomat Rolf Ekéus (2001–2007). Photo: HCNM

several hours to reach Blace, the main border-crossing into the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. From there we were taken to the Stenkovec II refugee camp and granted humanitarian status.

In 2001, we volunteered to be repatriated to Kosovo, where I had a job waiting for me as an interpreter with KFOR, the NATO peacekeeping force. However, in June 2002, we found ourselves having to flee to Skopje a second time.

Our application for asylum in Skopje was rejected again and again by the courts, until finally, on 29 May 2003, we were notified that we had to leave the country within 30 days or face forcible expulsion. The authorities caught up with us on 15 September 2003, when my wife and I were accosted on the street and taken to the police station in the town of Bitola in the south. After ten hours in detention, we were told that the police would deport us back to the Serbian border. From there, we proceeded to Kosovo but were targeted for further violence.

In the midst of all this turmoil, some friends advised me to look up the ERRC website. This proved to be my lifeline. With the help of the staff, we decided to seek asylum in Hungary. On 1 October 2003, we arrived in Budapest and lived in the refugee camp in Debrecen. The following December, we were granted asylum, again with the help of the ERRC.

A year later, we were reunited with our 11-year-old daughter Fidzirije, who had stayed behind with relatives in Skopje when we were deported. Not long after, I started working with the ERRC. As I write this, we have just bought a home in Ráckeve, a small town along the Danube south of Budapest.

Today, when I reflect on how my life has changed since 1999, I cannot get over how I ended up working for the very organization that transformed my life. I am aware that my family is one of the more fortunate ones. The thought that there are thousands of others who experience discrimination every single day makes me realize that the ERRC will be around for many years to come.

Dzavit Berisa, 31, is the Publications Officer of the European Roma Rights Centre, an international public-interest legal organization based in Budapest. He was born in Obilić, a municipality adjacent to Pristina, Kosovo, to parents belonging to the Egyptian minority. A trained miner, his plans to study law were shattered when the conflict in Kosovo broke out.

www.errc.org

OSCE/SUSANNA LÖÖF

Vienna, 10 July. Activists protest against ethnic profiling in connection with the Italian Government's plans to fingerprint Roma and Sinti living in camps in Italy. The opportunity to make their views known arose during a meeting organized by ODIHR to discuss the role of local authorities in integrating Roma into the social fabric.

Vollebaek: Discrimination against Roma a "major problem in Europe"

"Persistent discrimination against Roma is still a major problem in Europe," says High Commissioner on National Minorities Knut Vollebaek. "Roma have to a large extent been left out of the new security and prosperity in Europe."

He explains why the security implications of recent developments in the OSCE area concerning the migration of Roma and Sinti should be a cause for concern.

"Firstly, these communities have become even more vulnerable to physical, economic and social threats than they were before. Secondly, relations between Roma and other groups — whether belonging to a minority or to the majority population — are put to the test. These issues lie at the core of the work of the High Commissioner on National Minorities, with its emphasis on providing early warning and, whenever possible, early action to prevent conflict."

High Commissioner Vollebaek believes that while the country of origin should bear responsibility for the well-being of its nationals, the new country of residence also has a set of obligations to fulfil.

"In their home countries, Roma should be able to tap into opportunities and have access to rights, just like everyone else," he says. "And by the same token, as far as the so-called new migration is concerned, Roma should be able to enjoy freedom of movement as EU citizens and should not be discriminated against because of their ethnicity."

Both perspectives will be taken into account in a forthcoming study that will examine the impact of new trends in the migration of Roma and Sinti since the enlargement of the EU and consider how governments are responding in policy and practice.

The study is a joint undertaking by the High Commissioner on National Minorities, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, and the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights. A first draft is expected by the end of the year.

Standing up for Roma against cyber-hate

BY ROMANI ROSE

The underlying message of the article "The fight for online freedom: Tackling attempts to censor the Internet" in issue 2/2008 of the *OSCE Magazine* is correct in principle, because guaranteeing freedom of the media and the free flow of information also contributes to the worldwide protection of minorities from threats.

However, it is misleading to refer to the blocking of hate sites directed against minorities as "censorship" in the same breath as the filtering of the Internet for political purposes as practised in some countries. Let me explain why.

Having been victims of the Holocaust during the Nazi era, Roma and Sinti have in recent years increasingly been the target of racist campaigns and propaganda on hundreds of neo-Nazi hate sites and forums on the Internet. These sites have become more and more inflammatory, to the extent that readers are now directly incited to commit acts of violence. This is why I strongly believe that when State bodies and Internet providers decide to take measures against these sites, they should not be regarded as exercising censorship but as fulfilling a social and security-related obligation.

Online sales of music aimed at arousing hate and violence against Roma and Sinti have been on the rise. The song "Zigeunerpack" ("Gypsy Vermin") by a right-wing extremist band, for example, includes the lines:

Sinti and Roma, as they call themselves ...
If you spit in their face, they get what they deserve.

This song and others like it are banned in Germany on the grounds that they are "liable to corrupt the young". The group has also been declared a criminal organization by the law courts.

Countless sites carrying harmful material exist in a variety of languages in practically every OSCE participating State, often making direct reference to specific places and individuals. Hungary's Commissioner for Roma Affairs has recently lobbied successfully for the blocking of a Hungarian Internet portal that hosted a hate site calling for the grave violation of personal rights of Roma and Jews.

Closer to the OSCE, Anastasia Crickley, Personal Representative of the Chairman-in-Office on Combating Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination, has recently condemned calls for hate and violence against Roma and Sinti and other minorities as illegal and not to be accepted idly.

The Amsterdam-based International Network Against Cyber-Hate (INACH), which was established in 2002, laid the foundation for international co-operation between European hotlines and organizations working against racism. One of its goals is to deprive neo-Nazi websites and racist campaigns of a platform on the Internet. INACH's "network nodes", such as the German institution jugendschutz.net, have made some notable strides forward.

This sort of co-operation is crucial to international efforts to combat extremist websites and was highly welcomed by the OSCE participating States at their conference on the relationship between hate crimes and racism on the Internet, held in Paris in June 2004. However, it is clear that more resources should be placed at the disposal of cross-border initiatives such as INACH and jugendschutz.net to enable them to extend their work beyond individual cases.

It is worth noting that the main objectives of the fight against cyber-hate were first set out at the international conference on "Dissemination of hate in the Internet" initiated by the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles and held in Berlin in June 2000 under the auspices of the German Government and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. It was the first conference devoted to this subject.

The participants ranged from European justice ministers and U.S. legislators to executives of major media concerns and heads of police and intelligence services. They agreed on one overriding principle: "What is illegal offline must also be illegal online." They said they would not "tolerate passively or simply accept criminal offences on the Internet and the global dissemination and commercial exploitation of socially destructive cyber-hate".

As the global community continues to engage in healthy debate on the fine line between freedom of expression on the Internet and the need for censorship, let us reflect on a passage from the Berlin Declaration:

"… politics, trade and industry, and civil society [should] form a global coalition for combating the dissemination of hate in the Internet, in order to ensure that the Internet can make its contribution to the peaceful co-existence of all human beings in the future as a medium for the free discussion of all cultures."

Romani Rose is on the Advisory Board of the Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency in Germany and is Chairman of the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma. Born in Heidelberg in 1946 to a German Sinti family, he lost 13 relatives in concentration camps. He is the author and editor of several books and articles.

www.sintiundroma.de