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Statement of the European Roma Rights Centre

On the occasion of the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting:
Working Session 14: Roma and Sinti and, in particular, early education for Roma and Sinti
28 September-09 October 2009, Warsaw

Good morning,

The right to education is fundamental right guaranteed under international and domestic legislation in the OSCE region. At the same time it is a key mechanism for the inclusion of marginalised groups such as Roma and Sinti. In recent years, inequalities facing Roma in education, including segregated education, have been given attention by governments in the OSCE region. As a result a number of policy documents on Roma in general as well as on education, in particular, have been developed. However, still vast majority of Roma and Sinti in Europe today face numerous barriers in accessing education on an equal footing with the rest of the society.

The European Roma Rights Center (ERRC) is very concerned that in some countries, such as Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, a significant part of the Romani and Sinti child population is sent to special schools for children with intellectual or mental disabilities. In such schools, Romani and Sinti children do not earn a diploma preparing them for a competitive labour market. Quite the contrary: they are denied the right to education and emerge stigmatized as "stupid" and "disabled". These children will live out their adult lives under-educated, unemployed or condemned to low-paying, menial jobs. They will be unable to realise fundamental rights and will be deprived of basic dignity.

Romani and Sinti children are also segregated from non-Romani children in separate classes or schools because of spatial segregation or because of racial discrimination. Isolated from their non-Romani peers and frequently taught by under-qualified instructors, they too emerge from schooling ill-equipped for life in a multicultural democracy. Those Romani children who fight the odds, secure a place in - and manage to remain in - mainstream schooling, suffer racist humiliation or even physical abuse by their teachers or their peers, since at present in Europe "Gypsies" are loathed, feared and scorned.

In a landmark judgment for Roma across Europe, on 13 November 2007 the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights ruled that segregating Roma in education constituted unlawful discrimination. The Court also specifically emphasised that Romani children faced discriminatory barriers to education in a number of European countries.

The ERRC is concerned that in a number of OSCE participating states the inclusion of Romani and Sinti children in early education is minimal. There are numerous reasons for the non-participation of Romani and Sinti children in early education programmes, including the non-compulsory nature of the preschool education in a significant number of OSCE participating states, a lack of pre-school infrastructure to accommodate all pupils, a lack of funds for supporting preschool education of vulnerable children as well as the timely provision of information to Roma and Sinti parents. There are also worrying reports of segregated pre-schooling facilities for Roma and Sinti children. This is deeply problematic because early childhood education is imperative to ensure their success in compulsory level of education through enhancing learning skills and knowledge, and easing reported language difficulties.

The ERRC therefore urges the OSCE participating states to undertake the following measures in order to improve the access to education of the Roma and Sinti minority in the OSCE region:

- Make available free of charge, compulsory early education programmes in integrated school environments for all children, including Roma and Sinti;
- Cease immediately the practice of placing Romani children in "special schools" or "special classes" for the mentally handicapped, and refrain from establishing early education programmes in such facilities;
- Develop and implement comprehensive national action plans for the transfer of Romani children presently in "special schools" or "special classes" for mentally disabled children to mainstream schooling, with accompanying support programmes to ease transition;
- Ensure that adequate resources are allocated for school desegregation action plans and other programmes aimed at the integration of Romani children in mainstream school systems;

Thank you very much for your attention.

The European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) is an international public interest law organisation engaging in a range of activities aimed at combating anti-Romani racism and human rights abuse of Roma, in particular strategic litigation, international advocacy, research and policy development, and training of Romani activists. For more information about the European Roma Rights Centre, visit the ERRC website at <http://www.errc.org>.