

OSCE-ODIHR**Human Dimension Implementation Meeting 2019****Session 16, Roma and Sinti participation in public and political life****26 September 2019****Zemfira Kondur**

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“Protecting national minorities, including Roma, and minority languages in Ukraine”

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Excellencies,

In many OSCE member states Roma constitute a sizeable part of the population. Despite this, Roma are largely absent from local and national political decision-making. Roma communities in many places officially do not exist due to their absence from official registers, including the census. The official invisibility of Roma people negatively affects public funding that could help Roma communities with healthcare, education, employment, and housing. This invisibility also undermines the potential for Roma political participation and Roma-led social change. Other barriers associated with extreme poverty – illiteracy, poor infrastructure, lack of Identification documents. The lack of identification documents is often a significant factor for the social exclusion of Roma and Sinti in a number of participating States.

Populism and the explicit inclusion of racist and xenophobic agendas in mainstream political discourse are posing increasing challenges in the OSCE region. Anti-Roma racism remains a prominent tactic for mobilizing constituencies driven by hate, resentment and prejudice.

According to ODIHR Third Status Report on implementation of the AP on Improving the situation of Roma and Sinti within the OSCE Area, in many OSCE member states, there are no institutional policies and programmes in place to promote the active role and participation of Roma communities in government decision-making processes. Moreover, they are easy targets for vote-buying due to their vulnerable situation and social exclusion. Roma are poorly represented at local level, they are very seldom involved in the decision making process on issues which are relevant for their inclusion. When it comes to Roma women participation, the gender dimension has long been neglected, in addition being part of a minority they are facing double discrimination by the society and Roma community and practically deprived of the opportunity to participate in political life.

The OSCE Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti tasks participating States “to promote Roma women’s participation in public and political life”, adding that “Roma women should be able to participate on an equal basis with men in consultative and other mechanisms

designed to increase access to all areas of public and political life.” The 2010 CoE Strasbourg Declaration on Roma recommends promoting effective participation of Roma in social, political and civic life, while the newly-adopted Council of Europe Gender Equality Strategy 2018 – 2023 sets out to achieve balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision-making and to empower women candidates.

To foster the political participation of Roma men and women and bring them closer to local, national and European decision-making bodies the Council of Europe launched Roma Political Schools from September 2019 in Greece, Italy, Portugal, Turkey and Ukraine. This Political Schools includes Roma with the will to participate in local elections and possible national and European elections as representatives of their communities.

When we speak about consultative and other mechanisms designed to increase access to all areas of public and political life, I want to say that the Council of Europe has been a privileged witness to some of the positive developments since 2013 through its actions in the ROMED2, ROMACT and, more recently, ROMACTED joint programmes of the European Union and the Council of Europe. For example ROMED2 stimulated the self-organisation of Roma communities into Community Action Groups (CAGs). Through a structured process of dialogue and cooperation with local authorities, the CAGs identified the priorities of the community and suggested initiatives for addressing them. It is being implemented in 54 municipalities in 11 countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Portugal, Romania, the Slovak Republic, Republic of North Macedonia and Ukraine.

However, much more efforts are needed by participating States to ensure that Roma and Sinti are equal and effective partners in policy-making processes and in the implementation of all measures concerning them.

- Further efforts are needed to ensure diverse political leadership, promote ethnic diversity in institutions and enable the participation and representation of Roma and Sinti, including women and youth, in public authorities and institutions, as well as governments and parliaments
- Skills building programs for Roma activists and local elected representatives are needed so they can communicate with and engage citizens, advocate for priority issues, and develop realistic legislative and policy options.
- Policy implementation addressing Roma and Sinti is often most active at the local level, particularly considering the principles of decentralization. Hence it is of particular importance that consultation mechanisms entail effective involvement of Roma and Sinti while fully considering the needs and priorities of Roma and Sinti communities, as determined by and together with them
- Roma need real policies and legislative agendas that address genuine everyday needs.

Thank you for your attention.