



ORGANIZATION FOR SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE
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Roma Day

Protection of Minority Rights means Protection of Human Rights

by Ambassador Maurizio Massari

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Today we celebrate Roma Day, a day that re-focuses our attention on the plight one of the largest ethnic minorities in Europe. The Roma community, numbering more than 100.000 (exactly 107.200 according to the population census conducted in Serbia in 2002), in Serbia alone, has a long history of discrimination all over the region. Many of them live on the fringes of society, impoverished and vulnerable. The recent conflicts in the former Yugoslavia have affected many communities, none more so than the Roma. Expelled from their homes as so many others, they have found it particularly difficult to find refuge.

The plight of the Roma is not new but it highlights the need for the protection of minorities all over the region. For any country wanting to join the European family, the protection of minority rights is also a basic pre-requisite for membership, as set out in the Copenhagen Criteria of 1993. The Organization for Security and Co-operation (OSCE), with its missions in the region is in a unique position to lobby for the protection of minority rights throughout the countries of the former Yugoslavia and therefore assist in the integration of the region into the Euro-Atlantic alliance.

Serbia and Montenegro took an important step towards this goal yesterday by launching a National Strategy that will hopefully lead to many practical improvements in the lives of the Roma.

The National Strategy, developed with the help of the OSCE, covers fourteen main sectors, the development of which should impact on the Roma community. Priorities were set for four of the sectors: education, housing, employment, and the situation of the internally displaced persons (IDPs).

As far back as 1990, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe recognised the particular problems facing the Roma and took the lead in addressing the issue in the context of increasing racial hatred, xenophobia and discrimination in the region.

The government of Serbia and Montenegro, as a member of the OSCE, recognised its international obligations and the need to protect this vulnerable minority. It took an important step by adopting the Law on the Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities in 2002. The law makes specific reference to the Roma and accords the official national minority

status. This effectively enhances the legal protection afforded to them by obligating the authorities to improve their position. The Law foresees National Minority Councils representing the interests of national minorities in the fields of the use of languages, dissemination of information in the language of the national minority and the protection of their culture. The State Union Charter on Human and Minorities rights approved last year further strengthened those principles embodied in the legislation.

In order to inform the Roma on this new law, the OSCE Mission to Serbia and Montenegro developed and implemented a project called "The Roma in the New Law". It also enabled them to establish the National Council of the Roma National Minority, elected in May 2003 and it is the only elected representative body of the Roma national minority under the 2002 Law. Most recently, the OSCE Mission held a workshop for Roma editors to train them in various aspects of journalism and the latest broadcast technology.

Following the OSCE Permanent Council decision in November 2003, the government of Serbia and Montenegro also committed itself to developing a National Strategy aimed at taking practical steps at improving the lives of the Roma. With the support of the OSCE and its international partners, the Roma Secretariat of the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights, developed a draft strategy which would turn the commitments into reality.

This National Strategy is now reality. It needs to be implemented as soon as possible. The National Minority Councils need to be properly funded by the government. The OSCE and other international organisation remain committed to providing practical assistance to the National Council and the National Strategy.

The local authorities and the citizens of Serbia and Montenegro have an opportunity to adopt this process because it will help to guarantee the basic freedoms and rights of every citizen, no matter what ethnic or cultural background. Minority Rights are an integral part of basic human rights. Those who violate the rights of minorities also violate the basic rights of all.

The full acceptance and democratic integration into one family of different nations, people, ethnic and religious groups represents one of the major achievements of modern Europe. Today and in the years to come, Serbia Montenegro and other countries in the region have an opportunity to give their positive contribution to the consolidation of such European achievements.