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## **United States Mission to the OSCE**

### **On Implementation of the Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti**

As prepared for delivery by Nathan Mick  
To the Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting  
Vienna, November 7, 2013

Moderator,

On August 8, the OSCE community lost an icon of the Romani civil rights movement, Nicolae Gheorghe. He will be long remembered for his singular contribution to the advancement of human rights. As we tackle the issues before us today, I hope we can be inspired by the energy and creativity that Nicolae Gheorghe brought to this cause. The United States is grateful for his example and service to the OSCE.

Moderator,

In light of recent media attention on Roma, this meeting is timely in ways that we did not predict. It reminds us how important it is to be aware of how Roma are perceived and portrayed in public discourse, and not only when the media spotlight is turned on. Our shared OSCE commitments and underlying values call us to greater awareness of the impoverishment and exclusion that Roma face day after day, year after year.

Part of understanding the situation of Roma today is acknowledging the legacy of ancient prejudice and the consequences of past decades of communist dictatorship. There are many ways to contribute to such understanding, and, as one example, we welcome the decision by Poland's parliament to establish August 2 as a day to remember the genocide of Roma.

Unfortunately, continued racial profiling of Roma and expressions of intolerance and prejudice against them show that much more must be done to counter the ideas that were used to justify genocide in the past and which continue to be used to justify discriminatory treatment of Roma today.

At the annual Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warsaw, we heard about a distinct lack of meaningful progress in achieving Action Plan goals to improve the socio-economic status of Roma or to curb anti-Roma bias and discrimination. We heard about high-level government officials who continue to stereotype and disparage Roma, and we heard about the endemic poverty and lack of equal access to education that besets members of Roma communities in many participating States. The Action Plan and similar efforts have raised the profile of Roma issues, but they have not ameliorated the problems to any significant extent or successfully addressed the underlying causes and prejudices that keep Roma on the margins of society.

Initiatives such as the Roma Education Fund and the Roma Graduate Preparation Program at the Central European University in Hungary are steps in the right direction, but more must be done. School desegregation is a challenge in many countries. In Slovakia, efforts are in their initial phase and need to be pursued to ensure Roma children receive the same education as their non-Roma peers. Resistance to Roma integration in some OSCE countries may be vigorous, but one thing is certain: integration cannot be achieved by building walls that separate Roma communities from their neighbors.

Likewise, expulsion is not the answer. Evictions contribute to the displacement of Roma without providing durable solutions. One of the most pernicious practices of the past twenty years has been the arbitrary eviction of Romani families – sometimes whole communities – resulting in the displacement of large numbers of people from their homes. Displacement has an especially devastating effect on children, disrupting ties to schools, access to social services, and integration in public life. It reinforces stereotypes that Roma cannot or will not integrate, feeding anti-Roma sentiment that is often violently expressed, as we have seen repeatedly in the Czech Republic and elsewhere. It is imperative that participating States mount law enforcement campaigns to counter mob belligerence. At the same time, efforts must be made to reverse the extreme marginalization that feeds negative stereotypes, contributes to inter-ethnic tension, and risks inter-ethnic violence. Ensuring adequate law enforcement protection of Roma is necessary and welcome, but law enforcement is not a substitute for the actual implementation of a long-term strategy of inclusion and integration.

If the costs of integrating Roma are great, the costs of continued marginalization are even greater. Massive displacement risks creating housing crises and moving the challenge of integration elsewhere rather than finding constructive ways to resolve it. Initiatives in the Slovak Parliament to address the legal status of Roma housing settlements are encouraging, and those advancing these initiatives are to be commended for their political courage to address such a thorny issue. Participating States should undertake to ensure Roma have access to adequate housing, education commensurate with the broader population, and employment opportunities that give them the chance to overcome poverty.

Recent news coverage has once again put Roma in the spotlight – and shone a spotlight on the way Romani issues are portrayed by the media. Every opportunity should be taken to denounce anti-Roma sentiment and violence, both publicly and privately. We hear repeatedly from Roma and civil society organizations who work with Roma communities of the need for high-level acknowledgement of the significance of Roma issues and the importance of addressing them.

There has been some improvement in Romani political participation and inclusion of Roma in political life, but there is room for more to be done. Using civil registration as a basis for voter lists can facilitate voting, but the registration process must be open and transparent and must not entail barriers that disproportionately burden Roma.

Bans on the use of Romani or other minority languages in campaigning are inconsistent with OSCE commitments on free speech, on the rights of persons belonging to national minorities, and on free elections. Similarly, bans on ethnically based parties also violate OSCE commitments on free elections and on freedom of association. Efforts to foster minority political participation should not result in separate-but-unequal structures.

Moderator,

We welcome the ODIHR report on the implementation of the Action Plan. We are mindful, however, of the challenge of trying to document progress – or the lack of progress – without measurable data or benchmarks. We therefore welcome OSCE meetings such as this where participating States can share information on their strategies for Roma inclusion, including information about funding. These efforts compliment both the Decade of Roma Inclusion, which the United States has joined as an Observer, and the work of the European Union.

I would also recall that in his 2000 report on the situation of Roma in the OSCE region, the High Commissioner for National Minorities recommended that the participating States convene a meeting on data collection issues. Statistical data on the ethnic composition of populations is an important tool for establishing patterns of discrimination and for assessing anti-discrimination and other policies aimed at improving the conditions of Roma. Such a meeting could serve as a useful forum to explore related issues in the context of national census taking. We also applaud the work of the European Fundamental Rights Agency in conducting detailed, large-scale surveys and studies of the condition of Roma across the EU space.

Finally, I would like to thank Andrzej Mirga, ODIHR's senior adviser on Romani issues, for his stewardship of the OSCE's work in this area. During his years with ODIHR, he has not only advanced the OSCE human rights agenda, but he has also spearheaded the ODIHR response to outbreaks of violence and other extreme manifestations of bigotry. This work has constructively bridged both the human dimension and conflict prevention aspects of the OSCE's mission. Andrzej, it has been an honor and a privilege to work with you.

Thank you.