



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Discrimination Against Roma

As delivered by Ambassador Ian Kelly
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
January 31, 2013

Thank you Mr. Chairman.

Since its inception, the OSCE has been in the vanguard of efforts to promote the rights of European Roma, and the 2003 Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti remains a clear and cogent guide.

Regrettably, some governments have not only failed to create equal opportunity and foster the human rights of Roma citizens but, in some cases, continue to pursue policies that have the opposite effect. We regret that as we prepare to mark the 10th anniversary of the publication of the Roma and Sinti Action Plan, the situation of Europe's Roma citizens is perhaps more precarious than ever.

That is why I take the floor to express my government's deepening concern about discrimination and violence against Roma, as well as insufficient responses to these and other worrying phenomena, such as anti-Roma rhetoric.

As Andrzej Mirga, the ODIHR Senior Adviser on Roma and Sinti Issues, stated recently, "The authorities of participating States have to be aware of the danger this phenomenon poses for peace and cohesion in their societies. Real efforts need to be made to counter these racist messages, to combat discrimination and to protect Roma from violence."

The economic crisis that continues to afflict many states in the OSCE space appears to be fueling intolerance and racism; attacks against vulnerable populations such as the Roma and migrants are on the rise. In the first half of 2012, media reported 20 attacks, resulting in ten deaths, against Roma individuals in Central and Eastern Europe. We have also witnessed large anti-Roma demonstrations, in which vigilantes threw rocks and bottles at the homes of Roma, while shouting menacing taunts.

Meanwhile, forced evictions of Roma without adequate consultation, due process or the provision of appropriate, alternative housing continue. A recent study by the European Roma Rights Centre of 50 families who were evicted two years ago from their homes in the center of Cluj-Napoca, Romania, and relocated to a polluted former industrial compound near the site of the city's waste dump highlights the ill effects of such policies. According to the report, the average income of the community has fallen by 30%; more than a quarter of working age adults who were previously employed are now out of work; and 10% of the children have been placed in special education for pupils with mental disabilities, even though they were not previously in such classes.

The United States is concerned about forced evictions of Roma in Slovakia conducted under several pretexts. Increasingly, municipalities are labeling illegal settlements as “illegal waste dumps” which they claim they must clean up. Some four hundred mayors have signed onto an initiative essentially threatening to bulldoze Roma communities if the national government does not address the issue. So far, the government has not responded to the letter nor condemned the rash of evictions.

On 30 October 2012, some 150 people - including more than 60 children – were evicted from their homes in the district of Nižné Kapustníky, also in Slovakia. The homes – some of which had existed for many years - were demolished and the inhabitants were either bused to other parts of the country where they supposedly were registered as residents, or left to their own devices. Many found they had no place to stay.

Slovakia's Presov City Council has announced plans to evict some 200 Romani people from three apartment buildings in the Pod Hrádkom neighborhood. We call on the Slovak authorities to stop further forced evictions, which are not in line with international human rights standards, particularly during the winter months.

We are also concerned by reports by Amnesty International and other non-governmental organizations about forced evictions in Italy in 2012. We call on authorities in the city of Milan to ensure that the planned eviction of Roma from the Via Cassio area is preceded by adequate and timely communication with the affected community and that appropriate alternative housing is provided to these individuals.

Lack of documentation among Roma – from passports and identity documents to property deeds – renders Roma more vulnerable to actions such as forced evictions, and also limits access to basic rights and services. In Bulgaria, a new law mandating proof of residency in order to obtain identity documents, without which people cannot vote, is likely to disproportionately disenfranchise Roma. We call on the government of Bulgaria to address this issue in advance of this year's parliamentary elections.

Finally, we reiterate the responsibility of leaders throughout the OSCE space to denounce hate speech. In December, Hungarian journalist Zsolt Bayer penned an editorial that characterized some Roma as “animals” and “vermin” not fit for co-existence. Bayer concluded his chilling piece with a call to action: “there should be no animals, no way. This must be resolved – immediately and no matter how.” Particularly in light of anti-Roma demonstrations in the communities of Devecser and Gyongyospata, we looked to Hungary's national leaders to denounce Bayer's incendiary call. With the exception of Deputy Prime Minister Navracics, however, senior members of Fidesz – of which Mr. Bayer was a founding member – and the party itself have refused to condemn Bayer's comments. The link between hate speech and hate crimes is well documented; we call on leaders to reject such speech and to actively promote tolerance.

Mr. Chairman, it is incumbent on all of our governments to ensure that the human rights of all are respected – regardless of their ethnicity – and that government policies do not contribute to discrimination. We need to do more to ensure that we implement the commitments we have undertaken in this regard.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.