



Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights

"Hard Times and Hardening Attitudes: The Economic Downturn and the Rise of Violence against Roma."

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My first testimony here on Roma and Sinti issues was in 1994, when I was an associate of the Project on Ethnic Relations, based in Princeton, New Jersey. Then, shortly after the fall of communism, Roma and Sinti faced troubling times in Europe. The transition towards democracy and market economy that was welcomed by most and beneficial to many was accompanied by a rise in both ethnic consciousness and nationalist tendencies. In some post-communist countries, Roma and Sinti have been the victims of both the often difficult transition to a market economy, as the first to lose their livelihoods, and of nationalist agendas that have often singled them out as scapegoats. In the early 1990s, Roma and Sinti were the targets of a number of attacks, such as the mob violence in the Romanian village of Hadareni that left three Roma men dead and led to the destruction of the homes and property of many others. Such outbursts of violence against Roma, coupled with their dire socio-economic conditions, have created a strong impetus to migrate westward. But many Roma and Sinti who have sought asylum in the West have met with similar threats there, and violence against them has even brought more deaths.

Today, 15 years after my first appearance here, my testimony might seem very similar, but the point I want to make is that the situation has changed. As Senior Adviser on Roma and Sinti Issues at the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights in Warsaw, the situation I see today is different from that of the early 1990's, and in many respects more dangerous than what we were dealing with then. This is not, of course, meant in any way to disregard serious manifestations of discrimination and/or violence against Roma and Sinti committed by actors like public officials and law enforcement officers. But these are not my focus today.

In the early 1990s there was a wave of mainly impromptu community violence against the Roma and Sinti in Europe. The nature of the transition period contributed to this, as democratic institutions and the rule of law had yet to take root in countries that had only just rid themselves of communism. What we are witnessing today is the deliberate and organized use of hate-speech and violence targeting Roma and Sinti in a number of countries. It is easy to identify those behind the phenomenon, as anti-Roma hate-speech is promoted openly by a number of political groupings. There are those who think that violent acts targeting Roma and Sinti can also be traced to some of these parties and

groups, although concrete evidence has been difficult to obtain in cases of murder. The police and courts, which are usually slow or resistant to recognizing the racial basis for the attacks, often compound the problem. Official data from the monitoring of hate crimes committed against Roma and Sinti by participating States in the OSCE region remain very limited. In their submissions to ODIHR, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland identified crimes committed against Roma as notable examples of hate crimes in their country. The response from the Czech Republic even identified Roma as the group most vulnerable to hate crimes. But only nine participating States reported collecting data on hate crimes against Roma or Sinti (Croatia, Czech Republic, Latvia, Republic of Moldova, Poland, Russia, Serbia, Sweden and Switzerland).

The monitoring and reporting of hate-crimes committed against this community has to rely on various sources. It also has to overcome a tendency on the part of Roma and Sinti victims not to report hate-motivated crimes at all, due to an inherent distrust in the authorities. The real extent of the problem, therefore, cannot even be measured properly in those countries where data on anti-Roma hate crime are collected.

What characterizes the groupings behind these hate crimes?

They deliberately use hate-speech and, eventually, violence as tools to attempt to gain a place in mainstream politics. While this approach has so far met with only limited success, anti-Roma elements were part of the platforms that helped a number of political parties gain seats in the weekend's elections to the European Parliament.

These groupings revive demons from the past, like fascist symbols and language. They play on people's insecurities in hard times and manipulate their feelings by channelling their grievances against easy recognizable targets, like Jews or "Gypsies". They are more visible today than in the past, as they have learned that anti-Roma rhetoric can pay off politically and attract votes.

These groups and parties are dangerous because their strategy is to mobilize the segments of society that may not be willing to openly voice these ideas, but agree with them all the same. The results of the elections to the European Parliament demonstrate that parties can use anti-Roma rhetoric to gain greater representation, a fact that could play an important role in future national elections and potentially pose a danger to social cohesion and stability.

There is no direct evidence of a correlation between the current economic crisis and the incidence of hate crimes. Eurostat, the European Union's statistical body, recently released data on the economies of the 27 member States that well illustrate this point: GDP across the EU fell by 4.5 percent year-on-year in the first quarter, and countries like the Baltic States have seen an even more dramatic fall. But, despite the real economic difficulties faced by many of these countries, only in a few we have seen a rise in violence against Roma and Sinti. There must, therefore, be other factors behind what we are witnessing.

A key factor is the deteriorating social and economic situation of Roma and Sinti. This feeds anti-Roma prejudice and stereotypes that are easily exploited by the groups and parties already mentioned.

Second, political discourse has been deteriorating as more populist, racist or extreme views are allowed to circulate without raising an outcry or condemnation by public figures.

Finally, there is often a spark that ignites the fire – the rise in hate speech and violence against Roma and Sinti in Italy and Hungary can be traced back to concrete incidents provoked by the Roma themselves. But the situation on the ground was already highly combustible.

If the deteriorating social and economic situation of Roma and Sinti is one of the factors behind the rise in hostility, hate-speech and violence with which they are targeted, how has this happened? What has been done – or not done – to improve the situation of Roma and Sinti since I sat here 15 years ago?

ODIHR's recent status report, released in September 2008, on the implementation of the *Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti Within the OSCE Area*, provides a stark answer to this question. The general conclusion from our assessment is that there has been little tangible progress in most areas of concern; there is no sign of a positive breakthrough in any of the areas, and the movement in some areas has actually been backward.

Significant gaps remain between Roma communities and mainstream society in areas such as housing, education, employment and access to public services and justice. There is a lack of proactive approaches by governments at the national, regional and local levels, as well as a lack of measures to ensure the sustainability of policies by providing adequate financial, institutional and human resources. Although there are some positive recommendations and good practices being piloted at the local level, these have not been translated into country-wide practices.

Government-run Roma-related programs do not prioritize or focus enough on strategic areas that can ensure sustainable change, such as access to quality education at all levels. Significant challenges still remain to ensuring stronger participation and involvement of Roma and Sinti, both electorally and in civil society, in policy design and implementation.

The status report outlines disturbing trends with regard to racism and intolerance against Roma and Sinti, including against Roma and Sinti migrants. They face a growing dependency on social welfare, police violence, forced evictions and ghettoisation. Roma and Sinti issues continue to figure only marginally on governments' political agendas, and then often only when tensions threaten to escalate into violence.

The clear conclusion is that neglect is no longer an option. States have to demonstrate real political will and take vigorous action to close the gap between the majority and this minority. Otherwise, the preconditions will remain for continuing – or even escalating – tensions and violence against Roma and Sinti.

In the short term, it is essential for officials and opinion makers to mobilize, and publicly condemn the ideologies and activities of extremist parties and movements. The EU should play an important role in this process, by providing leadership in challenging any developments that endanger minorities or threaten social cohesion and stability. Another recommendation is for national courts to make better and more effective use of European Court of Human Rights jurisprudence related to hate crimes and racist violence.

Over the long term, governments should enhance their efforts and increase budgetary allocations for the implementation of Roma-related policies, ensuring that an impact is made at the local level.

Promoting the development and perpetuation of a political climate based on democracy and rule of law, respect for human rights and the protection of minorities should be a priority for all governments. Competent authorities should make full use of legal measures to prevent the emerging of and outlaw those political parties and movements of which statutes and /or activities are breaching law and conflicting with constitutions.

ODIHR Contact Point on Roma and Sinti Issues activities:

Combating racism and discrimination is central to what the Contact Point does, and this is an element of many of the provisions of the *Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti Within the OSCE Area*. The Contact Point has paid constant attention to the issue of racist violence, hate crimes against Roma, tensions and crisis situations. To assess such incidents and the human rights situation of Roma and Sinti first-hand, the Contact Point has made fact-finding visits to Romania (2007) and Italy (2008). It is currently preparing a field assessment visit to Hungary (at the end of June) following a number of attacks against and killings of Roma that have occurred over the past year. The situation of Roma in the Czech Republic is also of concern following anti-Roma protests by extremist groups in the town of Litvinov.

The Contact Point also supports OSCE participating States in implementing OSCE Ministerial Council Decision 6 (2008) on *Enhancing Efforts to Implement the Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti Within the OSCE Area*, with a special emphasis on early education.