

“The Implementation of Policies and Action Plans
for Roma, Sinti and Travellers,
and Measures Against the Anti-Gypsyism Phenomenon
in Europe.”

Warsaw, 20 -21 October 2005

**Ambassador Christian Strohal,
Director of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights**

Closing remarks

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I think our hope expressed during the opening session, namely that this conference contributes to a focused, relevant and forward-looking debate, has been fully fulfilled. We have heard a variety of opinions, experiences, suggestions and also critical comments, which will help us, the relevant authorities and the international community, to develop even more targeted responses to the challenges of implementing the “promises” that have been made vis-à-vis Roma during the past decade. Let me just briefly summarize what I would see as **elements of “added value” resulting from the current conference:**

This International Roma Conference has been about promoting the process of **implementation** of existing national plans of action and recommendations - in particular the OSCE Action Plan on Roma and Sinti, and the Council of Europe’s recommendations for Roma communities. What this conference was NOT about is launching new initiatives, new commitments, etc.

- The meeting will also bring on the agenda of policy making the phenomenon of racism against Roma, Sinti and Travellers, including its particular forms called by some authors and activists as “Anti-Gypsyism”. [*this text in italic and within brackets was not presented Regardless of terminology, the practitioners’ view is that the effective implementation of international and governmental plans is seriously hindered by the intensity of prejudice and of direct and indirect racism against Roma, Sinti, Travellers.*]

The destructive effects of such racist attitudes are more visible in cases of violence against Roma, Sinti, Travellers in particular local communities, throughout the CoE/OSCE space.

- *The case of violence against Roma, Ashkalie, Egyptians in Kosovo has been frequently and strongly brought into discussion in this perspective.*
- *The less visible but nonetheless destructive effects of racism are those entrenched in the practices of some institutions, as illustrated by systematic mistreatment of Roma, Sinti and Travellers in the work of police, schools, health and employment institutions, as well as in various forms of mass media.]*
- In terms of substance, this Implementation Conference has contributed to formulating some “good practice guidelines” based on already existing practices collected both by the OSCE and the Council of Europe, in the framework of the recent decisions of both organizations, in particular the Warsaw Council of Europe Summit, for enhanced co-operation between both organizations.
- The various speakers and papers used this opportunity to enter into a discourse on the vulnerabilities, challenges and “controversial” phenomena confronting Roma and Sinti communities in the OSCE region.
- This will allow both the OSCE and the Council of Europe to develop standards based on the results of this discourse, and their possible solutions, into a language rooted in human-rights principles and experience.
- Another suggestion for more effective implementation of Roma policies is to raise awareness on how to create better **inter-linkages** among Roma-related initiatives. This would avoid parallel, and sometimes redundant, programmes and projects and facilitate better use of the resources allocated by the limited number of donor States and organisations.
- The experience with the “ups” and “downs” in setting the format and modalities for this Conference (beginning with discussions during the 2004 HDIM) may in itself serve as a lesson on how to tackle some of the obstacles in achieving inter-linkages among participating States and international organizations.
- An important priority mentioned by government representatives and NGOs was the engagement of the Roma community in **municipal affairs**, thereby improving their position in daily life in all areas such as housing, education, employment, healthcare. It is important to stress that it is at the municipal level that real change can be implemented. National action plans may have been formulated at the national level, but it is important to oversee the objectives implemented at the local level.

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A very active discussion on the issue of **Roma IDPs and the conflict in Kosovo** took place. Against the backdrop that the situation of Roma in refugee camps is extremely difficult, some significant recommendations were made:

- Urgent need for action on medical evacuation of Roma in this region.
- Concerning **refugee policy**, **Western European** nations need to formulate humanitarian refugee policies that do not re-victimise those that have been forced to flee from their homes.
- The Roma population has not been able to successfully resettle in Kosovo because, in the opinion of governments, they lack the proper documentation, which leads to unequal socio-economic opportunities. Therefore, civic registration should be recognised as an important issue for the Roma community.

And in this context, we remind you all about the forthcoming OSCE Conference in Belgrade, 28 November 2005, on civil registration of Roma in South Eastern Europe.

- Not only can international organizations support the Roma community. It is also important to recognise the potential impact of a more unified voice of the Roma people. It was further recommended during the Conference that a common political platform representing the diverse but coherent voice of the Roma community should be encouraged. And in this regard participants committed themselves to work out a position paper regarding Roma refugees, IDPs and the status of Kosovo.

The debates during this conference brought a valuable contribution to exploring how to achieve the desired process for *moving words into action*, for *matching commitments with deeds*, and with *FUNDS*.

- With regard to funding mechanisms it was proposed to promote the launching of a process allowing deeper reflection and assessment of how funds can be more effective in making a sustainable impact, especially in terms of economic development. The process may begin with the commissioning of an inventory of various funds and programmes, with an initial assessment of the input.

The Conference has contributed to articulating a political vision **to effectively mainstream Roma affairs in participating States**, and in intergovernmental organizations. This vision is based on the lessons learned (both good and bad) in the implementation of Roma-related commitments and recommendations of both the OSCE and the Council of Europe.

- Part of the mainstreaming effort is the commitment to tackle the particular forms of racist attitudes and practices, which have been so amply documented by this Conference. These have been defined, by some of the participants to this debate, as “*anti-gypsyism*” or/and “*anti-tziganism*.” We need to move from passively observing anti-gypsyism to active measures meant to prevent and combat it. Mainstreaming measures against racism and xenophobia cannot be effective without focused monitoring of the existing problems.
- The best results have always come when discriminated groups were strongly involved in the activities of the bodies dealing with their problems. The OSCE’s successes in addressing Roma issues are a result of the activity of the ODIHR Roma and Sinti Contact Point. This, we hope, could be replicated not only within other units of the OSCE but also within other intergovernmental organizations.
- For instance, it has raised awareness of some recent side effects of current practices of Roma and Sinti policy-making. This would include a sense of renewed hostilities and intolerance in some segments of society in particular States, generated by distorted perceptions of Roma and Sinti policies/initiatives, which some label as “positive discrimination,” Roma-“targeted” institutional arrangements, etc; solutions must be explored in view of preventing further negative developments.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we have said at the beginning of this Conference, it will only be as good as its follow-up. From the discussions of the past two days, we should be able to distil a number of items which are particularly **well-suited for future action**. I would like to offer the following:

- It remains the obligation of the organizers of this Conference **to continue the implementation process** - to design and to manage its development properly so that after a number of years we may report that we have indeed accomplished some significant progress in improving the situation for Roma and Sinti communities throughout the OSCE region;
- A number of concrete and implementable suggestions have been formulated, which I would like to highlight. These include:
 - Involving senior and high-level officers in major line ministries, involved in implementing the existing national and international action plans, with the implementation of Roma and Sinti policies.
 - This involvement of senior government officials should complement, and eventually correct, current practices in some participating States when dealing with Roma policy affairs.

- We hope that at some stage of this implementation process we will be able to raise both the number, and the profile, of the representatives of participating States who are directly and/or indirectly interested in solving the issues currently confronting Roma and Sinti communities throughout our region.
- We are welcoming the progress in setting up the newly-created, Council of Europe-sponsored, European Roma and Travellers' Forum (ERTF). To this end, we congratulate all the actors, participating States and NGOs, and Roma and Sinti representatives - all of them have brought an essential contribution to what is already considered to be a historic achievement. We look forward to the 14-15 December meeting of the plenary assembly of this Europe-wide, democratic representative body of the Roma and Sinti.

A proposal was formulated to consider continuing this Warsaw Roma Implementation Conference with a **follow-up event**, under the auspices of intergovernmental organizations, and eventually to be jointly organized by the Chairing governments of IGOs involved in Roma and Sinti affairs - mainly the OSCE Chairman-in-Office and the Chair of the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers; we have heard a proposal coming from Romania to host a meeting of this format at beginning of 2006.

- It is hoped that other States may join this core group of organisers, including the States active in the Decade for Roma Inclusion, and/or the States holding the Presidency of the European Union.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank you once again for coming to join us at this conference, for having contributed with all your efforts and ideas, and for having kept up such a good focus and sense of collaborative endeavour during the past two days.

We can be proud to have made another important step in making reality what was promised more than a decade ago, in the various formats of our international organizations. We should not let ourselves be discouraged by the obstacles along the way, as insurmountable as they sometimes seem. It is essential to be realistic, and honest to ourselves when assessing past practices and measuring how far we have come. But at the same time, the outlook for really making human rights and democracy a tangible reality for all, including members of Roma and Sinti or Traveller communities, may never have looked so promising.

Thank you for your attention.