

OSCE ODIHR**Human Dimension Implementation Meeting 2019**

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Dr. Iulius Rostas

Visiting Professor, Central European University

Introductory statement

Roma and Sinti are considered the largest minority group in Europe, yet they remain absent from the important political debates taking place in the power centers of the political systems of the countries where they live, whether those debates are at national, regional or local level. Nevertheless, over the last 29 years, one could notice improvements with regard to Roma and Sinti political participation in the different OSCE participating States.

Not only do Roma and Sinti voters freely cast ballots, some Roma and Sinti individuals have run for public office, a number of political agreements have been reached between Roma and Sinti organizations and mainstream parties, and Roma and Sinti politicians have set up their own political parties. In some instances, Roma and Sinti have been elected members of parliaments (Bulgaria, Hungary, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia); or members of the European Parliament (Spain, Hungary and Romania); some Roma and Sinti individuals have even assumed executive positions as ministers (Macedonia) and deputy ministers as part of political negotiations between Roma and mainstream political forces; and some Roma have been elected as mayors or representatives on local deliberative bodies. In some participating States, complex systems of national minority representation and autonomy institutions have been set up, and Roma and Sinti have used these avenues to influence government decisions.

Nevertheless, the progress achieved does not allow Roma and Sinti to exert a level of political influence that is proportional to their estimated numbers. Hence the common use of different terms to describe Roma and Sinti political participation, such as “under-representation”, “meaningful participation”, “adequate representation”, “limited participation”, etc.

A closer look at the electoral processes in many OSCE participating States indicates some of the obstacles Roma and Sinti face in achieving higher political influence. Some of these obstacles have been openly established by law, such as in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where Roma cannot register to run for the Presidency;¹ some other obstacles include the indirect consequences of electoral regulations, such as when the electoral threshold for entering national parliaments is raised, or when more restrictive rules for registering political parties and candidates in parliamentary and local elections are instituted.

¹ The European Court of Human Rights, *Sejdic and Finci vs Bosnia and Herzegovina* (27996/06 and 34836/06).

Political participation of Roma and Sinti is a complex phenomenon shaped by different factors: the design of electoral systems, the regulatory framework related to elections, the minority protection system, the external pressure on participating States, factors related to domestic and foreign policies, the evolution of international relations, and other factors related to Romani self-organization.

The Roma and Sinti and the particular challenges and obstacles precluding their full inclusion into the wider society have been recognized within the OSCE since early 1990's, and participating States have progressively made commitments towards combating racism and discrimination against them and improving their situation. The genuine participation of Roma and Sinti in public and political life and in all policy and decision-making processes affecting them was considered of paramount importance.

Generally, the findings and conclusions of the ODIHR status reports as well as those emerging from the series of events organized by ODIHR throughout the years, with a focus on participation of Roma and Sinti, indicate a very modest and unsatisfying progress of this essential prerequisite for their genuine inclusion. With every unfolded event and status report produced, same of very similar recommendations are reiterated urging participating States to step-up and accelerate their efforts in this regard, underlining that a real breakthrough in improving the situation of Roma and Sinti can only be achieved through their empowerment and effective participation as partners in all policies concerning them.

The essential principles embodied by the Lund Recommendations and the benefits they can produce for the entire society continue to elude Roma and Sinti on a backdrop and a trend in Europe that sees a resurfacing of old prejudices perpetuated against them by nationalist extremist parties and populist politicians. In such times of political turmoil as we witness nowadays, when anti-Roma rhetoric and incitement is broadcasted loud, at the highest level, and most of the time met with impunity across Europe, there is need for clear leadership unequivocally condemning racism and hatred against Roma and Sinti, as well as demonstrating a stronger resolve in actually transposing the OSCE commitments into real deeds at national, regional and local levels.

CPRSI reports have revealed the mechanism of exclusion of Roma from political participation: obstacles in exercising their voting rights due to lack of identification, inaccurate voter registries, lack of voter education, illiteracy among Roma, vote-buying, family voting, other legal and administrative impediments. The fact that such practices are tolerated and remain unsanctioned by the authorities send a message that Roma voting matter less within the electoral processes. The fact that Roma candidates in mainstream political parties remain an exception could be related to this perception of Roma as a less significant political mass which at best could be manipulated through vote-buying. As some scholars put it, these practices are part of larger mechanism of exclusion of Roma pertaining to what is usually called antigypsyism.² Other scholars have specifically focused on hate speech against Roma during electoral campaigns and the potential impact in creating an intimidating atmosphere for Roma both as candidates and voters.³

² Sergio Carrera, Judit Toth, Ngo Chun Luk, Julia Guerin, *Political Participation of the Roma in the European Union*, (Brussels: Academic Network on European Citizenship Rights, 2019).

³ Jonathan Mack, Anja Reuss, Christina Pesch, Richard Otterness, *Antigypsyism in Public Discourses and Election Campaigns* (Heidelberg: Central Council of German Sinti and Roma, 2017).

To sum up, the most important challenges to Roma political participation:

- the scarcity of data about how Roma and Sinti participate in politics,
- the gender disparities among Roma men and women when it comes to political participation,
- the voter registration and vote buying,
- engagement with local authorities,
- efficiency of minority representation mechanisms,
- the diversity among Roma, and
- cooperation with Roma NGOs.

Conclusion

There is no need for further commitments, as the existing ones are sound and comprehensive, and neither there is any shortage of good practices or even tools and instruments. What is really lacking is the political will of participating States to respect and fulfill their commitments towards Roma and Sinti.

Recommendations

To OSCE:

- Develop regional initiatives for political education of Roma in the participating States;
- Continue to monitor election process in the participating States with due attention paid to Roma communities and the representation of Roma women and youth within these processes;
- Recruit whenever possible Roma as part of OSCE electoral monitoring missions.

To participating States:

- Develop and implement legal measure to effectively combat antigypsyism, including structural discrimination;
- Create mechanism for effective political representation of national minorities in decision making processes at all level;
- Make sure that Roma and Sinti women and youth are included in such mechanisms;
- Develop and implement project aiming at electoral education of marginalized groups, including Roma, with specific focus on Roma and Sinti women and youth;
- Enforce consistently the legal provision against vote-buying;

- Enforce immediately the legal provision on hate-speech, especially in cases involving politicians and state officials;
- Encourage mainstream parties to include Roma and Sinti on their lists of candidates by promoting diversity programs;
- Collect data on Roma and Sinti political participation.

To Roma and Sinti organization:

- Make use of all opportunities to participate in decision-making processes at all levels;
- Organize Roma and Sinti and engage actively with local authorities and other state institutions to address the needs and priorities of Roma and Sinti communities;
- Pressure the mainstream political parties to include Roma and Sinti candidates on their lists with special attention to Roma and Sinti women and youth;
- Continue to monitor electoral processes and report cases of hate-speech and other incidents against Roma and Sinti.