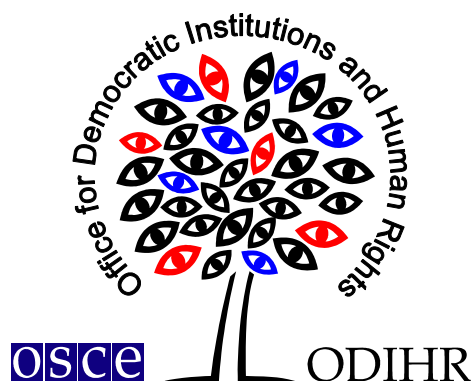


Address by Ambassador Christian Strohal
Director of the OSCE Office for Democratic
Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)

International Conference on
Good Practices in Promoting Romani and Minority Women in
Political and Democratic Processes: Focus on Experience in
Romania in Promoting National Minorities and Roma in
Democratic Institutions

Bucharest, 16 April 2004



Thank you very much, and thank you all for being here.

It's a particular pleasure for me to be with you at this conference. I would like to begin with a few brief remarks about why I think this is an important event; it comes at a crucial moment and is dealing with a crucial issue.

One can see that it's an important conference just by looking at the wide range of participants, as well as by looking at the organizers. And if you will allow me, I would like to start by thanking, of course, the parliament and, more specifically, the president of its Commission for Human Rights and Minority Issues for co-organizing this conference with us. In doing so, I think the Chamber of Deputies here has sent a very clear and important message not only to legislators but also to political parties and to society at large that this is an important issue that Roma and women, and Roma women specifically, are not simply the beneficiaries of policies but that they are key actors; they are voters; they are participants in the political process and an intellectual force in the development of political priorities. I think that signal is very clear, and I am sure it is also being heard very clearly.

I would also like to thank the European Commission, which has made this conference possible with the support that they have been providing, particularly to the programme that we have been developing and implementing together called "Roma, use your ballot wisely!" You can find an outline of this programme in the documentation, and it's even on the wall, and I am sure that this is a programme that you will see merits a longer-term perspective.

And I would also like to thank CRISS, which has made this event possible through long hours of preparation. I am sure that they will also ensure that the follow-up to this conference will be as well thought through and executed as the preparation was.

And, of course, I would finally like to thank all the other co-organizers for this conference.

So this is a crucial conference. I said the participation is also a reflection of that, and I am impressed that we have here Roma women and non-Roma non-women, which means men, like me. This is very important, and I will tell you why. I assumed my function about a year ago, and there were two events very early on in this function: one was a meeting preparing for the Action Plan on Roma and Sinti – and I will come back to the Action Plan in a moment – and another one was a seminar in Warsaw on the political participation of women. I was struck at this conference by the absence of men, and so I began by asking the question: "Where are the men?" This conference represents progress as far as I am concerned, seeing that not only women are talking about the role of women and the role of Roma women in particular but that there are also men here – and I will come back to this as well.

It was also very striking at that seminar that we had a side event for Roma women; I am happy to see some of you again here. What impressed me at that event was the dedication

and vision of all of you who were there. I am sure that, with that dedication and that vision, you will also be able to contribute to this conference with concrete recommendations in light of your experiences.

As I said earlier, this conference comes at a crucial moment, which brings me back to our Action Plan. This is Year 1 of the OSCE's Action Plan for Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti, which was adopted last December by the 55 foreign ministers. I think that it is appropriate in this first year of the Action Plan that we are focusing on issues related to political participation. If you look at the Action Plan, you will see that one of the threads running throughout that document is the emphasis on the need to include Roma and Sinti women.

This is a crucial moment not only because of the Action Plan – we are also at the threshold of decade of Roma and Sinti inclusion – but also because of today's geopolitical situation. This conference is taking place in a volatile environment that comprises very promising developments as well as new geopolitical threats. It's a time of very important enlargement processes (NATO and the European Union) and of stabilization processes in South-Eastern Europe, but, as we have seen, some of those processes are still very fragile.

And these new threats in the new geopolitical environment, such as discrimination, new forms of exclusion, and issues such as anti-Semitism and xenophobia, will all be very much among the priorities of this year's activities within the OSCE.

If you take a look at the documentation and conference programme that you all have, you will see one subtext: the issue of double discrimination. This is the issue of political discrimination and of minority discrimination, as well as the question of how we can turn this double discrimination into double empowerment. I hope that this conference will highlight that point: how to turn that danger and that reality, in many cases, of double discrimination into double empowerment.

What exactly does this mean? We need to look at your experiences and to consider your suggestions for concrete measures to break the vicious cycle of marginalization through gender bias, marginalization resulting from poverty, which leads to political disenfranchisement to invisibility, not just of issues, but also of individual human beings. We need to do this by achieving mutually reinforcing levels of action, by making women the central participants of political processes, that is, participants in shaping all issues in society. This does not mean that we should have women who only represent women; I am very happy as a man to be represented by a woman, and I think that this is something this conference can consider in terms of changing stereotypes, particularly those of men, of course.

If you look at your programmes, you will see that there are a number of open questions. I hope that this conference will give us all an opportunity to contribute to clarifying some of these questions and finding answers to others; I hope that we can find forward-looking answers that we can take further after this conference ends. There are issues of political

parties, of how they can develop strategies to include women and of how they can account for the implementation of those strategies. There are issues of electoral systems, questions about how we can move beyond simple quotas and numbers and make a real impact on major issues.

You will also be looking at the complex situation in crises, post-crisis situations, and crisis prevention, as well as the issue of seeing women as victims – clearly they are, but they can don't have to be only victims; women can also be catalysts for finding solutions.

Regarding all of these issues, I hope that, by the end of this conference, we will be able to come forward with an answer to the question of how we can best develop not only individual solutions to individual problems but also a longer-term strategy, keeping the Action Plan in mind, that identifies the best combination of measures that we can use to have an impact on a broad range of actors throughout the OSCE region.

I would like to make one more point in particular regarding substance and the participation of women in the electoral process. I will refer simply to a few specific recommendations made in a final report by my Office on presidential and parliamentary elections a few years ago. If you will indulge me for another minute, I would like to cite three recommendations. We said that political parties should consider measures to encourage greater participation by women in elections. This should include more transparency in the selection of candidates, specific measures to increase the number of women candidates in higher positions on lists, and increasing the number of women on central and local committees. We said that parties should be informed about important issues for women voters and should develop policies that appeal to, and meet, the concerns of women.

The second recommendation refers more precisely to effective actions that should be taken to ensure that currently disenfranchised Roma citizens are provided appropriate identification and residency documents to ensure their electoral rights.

And I would like to quote the final recommendation: “greater efforts should be made to ensure that Roma citizens receive information about their voting rights”.

These recommendations were made in a report on the presidential and parliamentary elections in Romania in December 2000, but they could also be made about many other countries. What is important here is that we recognize the issues and that we are aware of the recommendations that have already been made. Proof of our commitment lies not only in formulating recommendations but in following through on them and in translating them into reality. I would very much hope and expect that this conference, with your help, will be an important milestone in this development of turning recommendations into reality. I wish you all success in this endeavour.

Thank you very much!