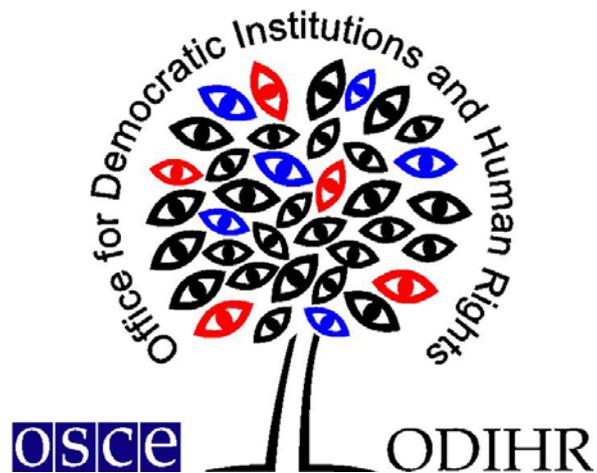


Opening remarks

Ambassador Janez Lenarčič

Director of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights



SUPPLEMENTARY HUMAN DIMENSION MEETING

Sustainable Policies for Roma and Sinti Integration

10 July 2008

Hofburg, Vienna

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to warmly welcome you all to this Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting, on “*Sustainable Policies for Roma and Sinti Integration*”. The aim of this meeting is to discuss ways to move beyond words and translate the *OSCE Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti within the OSCE Area* into concrete implementation in particular at regional and local levels.

I myself am pleased to be here among you, the first SHDM that I attend as ODIHR Director. I would like to especially welcome the representatives of national institutions, the many regional and local municipal representatives, as well as our partner international organisations and a significant number of civil society members.

In the same vein, I would like to thank the Finnish OSCE Chairmanship for having chosen this important topic and to welcome Ms. Sarita Friman-Korpela, the Secretary General of the Advisory Board on Romani Affairs of Finland.

At the outset of this meeting, let me say that the OSCE’s concern for, and its occupation with, Roma and Sinti communities has, in comparison with action taken within other international fora, been exemplary. As early as 1990, the OSCE recognized the specific challenges faced by Roma communities throughout the OSCE region. During the 1990 Copenhagen Conference on the Human Dimension, participating States affirmed their commitment to raise awareness and to introduce effective measures to combat racial and ethnic hatred and discrimination towards Roma.

A decade later, the 2003 Maastricht Ministerial Council adopted the *Action Plan on Roma and Sinti*, thus strengthening the commitments that address the significant disparities between the majority and Roma and Sinti populations. The Action Plan, we all remember, is aimed at “ensuring *that*

Roma and Sinti people are able to play a full and equal part in our societies, and at eradicating and discrimination against them.”

This, I believe, serves as a good and necessary reminder of why we have gathered here in the Hofburg for this meeting today and tomorrow. While the respect for civil and political rights of Roma has, *en gros*, improved somewhat over the years, serious problems remain. In short: Roma and Sinti are not yet able to “*play a full and equal part in our societies*”; “*discrimination against them*” has not yet been eradicated.

Today and tomorrow, we will hear a lot about the role and responsibility of regional and local authorities in the process of integration; about good practices that testify to the improvement of the situation of Roma in some quarters; and about measures that can facilitate the access of Roma to public services. The ODIHR has drafted a report that assesses aspects of the Action Plan’s implementation. The discussions today and tomorrow will be valuable for us indeed as we finalize the report.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

The ODIHR, as you all know, acts as clearing house on initiatives undertaken by OSCE States and facilitates exchanges of information on best practices. Our findings thus far indicate that there is a need to strengthen Roma-related policies and their implementation at the regional and local levels. All too often, States develop policy initiatives at the national level, without ensuring commensurate impact at the regional and local level within the targeted communities. Furthermore, policy commitments too often are not followed through with the necessary budgetary allocations to ensure their realization. The implementation process is therefore incomplete.

It is incomplete due to a lack of political will at the national level, and indifference, apathy or neglect to implement policies at the regional or local levels. Yet indifference does not solve pressing issues of integration, or of

isolation, poverty and a lack of socialization. Communities are facing problems throughout the OSCE region and those affect the majority as well. We have seen evidence of such spill-over, and sadly very recently so, in several places in Europe.

This is a particularly favorable time to consider the role and responsibility of regional and local authorities. The trend towards decentralization of state power to regions and towards empowering local authorities in States offers opportunities for more effective integration of Roma. Regional and local authorities now have the chance to enhance their efforts to integrate Roma and ensure that they have full and equal access to public services, including access to quality education, health care and social services.

There are, of course, challenges ahead. Let me mention two. Regional and local authorities need to become more proactive in addressing challenges and seeking solutions in co-operation with Roma and Sinti communities. If we do not devise policies that work, the problems we see will not just *not* disappear but, instead, escalate and intensify, and may even threaten the human security of Roma communities. That is why there is a need for concerted action at all levels, but most essentially at local level.

Second, Roma representatives themselves need to bear more responsibility for decisions and solutions to their problems at the local level. As the Action Plan calls it: *“For Roma, with Roma”*. It is clear that sustainable solutions to the challenges faced by Roma will not come about without their direct involvement and empowerment, and their assumption of responsibility.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would now like to warmly welcome and hand over to our keynote speaker, Mr. Gruia Bumbu. We are very delighted to have him at this meeting in his capacity as State Secretary and President of the National Agency for Roma in Romania.

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Thank you, State Secretary.

I would now like to turn to Ms. Isabela Mihalache who will for us summarize the discussions and recommendations that have emerged from this morning's side event with civil society. By way of introduction, Ms. Mihalache is a Senior Programme Manager at the Open Society Institute in Budapest and as such a long-standing partner of the ODIHR. Ms. Mihalache, you have the floor.

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Thank you. For us at the ODIHR, this meeting will certainly prove most useful. The discussions today and tomorrow will enhance the ability of our programmes and activities to assist participating States more effectively in implementing their commitments in this field and will provide most valuable input for finalizing the status report which we intend to present, in its final form, at the HDIM in October.

I wish us all a productive meeting, and encourage you to speak out freely and with concrete recommendations in mind.