

United States Mission to the OSCE

Session 14: Roma and Sinti

*Early education
Specially selected topic*

As prepared for delivery by Petra Gelbart
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Thank you, Madam Moderator,

When we look at the problems facing Romani communities in the OSCE region, it often seems that we are confronted with a Gordian knot that cannot be untied. Governmental and inter-governmental action plans routinely break down into a long “to-do list” in the fields of housing, employment, health care, political participation, and more – so many problems that one hardly knows where to begin. Persistent societal discrimination against Roma individuals, which in its most egregious form has resulted in horrific acts of violence against them, compounds the tension around solving these problems.

If there is one knife that may sever this knot, one way positively to attack all these problem areas, it might be by improving access to education for Roma. The United States welcomes the focus on this issue by the participating States and by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

It is often suggested that Romani culture is hostile to or somehow mutually exclusive with participation in education, and that Romani culture is to blame for the lower levels of education that Roma have relative to other populations. In fact, as early as 1933, two Romani organizations formed in Romania which advocated (among other things) establishing kindergartens for Roma, adult literacy classes, and schools to admit Roma. Moreover, virtually every Romani NGO today makes access to education a singular priority.

The High Commissioner on National Minorities observed in his report on the situation of Roma in the OSCE region, “. . . Romani parents repeatedly stressed the overriding priority they attach to improving their children’s access to education and scholastic achievement. In their experience, the principal explanation for poor attendance and performance levels of Romani youth lies not in ‘Roma values,’ but in their children’s experience of discrimination in public schools.” Even in the absence of active racism, Romani pupils are systematically excluded from school cultures because multicultural education programs are either completely absent or fundamentally flawed, providing no positive Romani role models to Romani children or their peers from other groups.

Further illustrating their strong desire for access to high quality education, Romani families have sued, with some success, to end discriminatory practices or segregated schooling. Romani families achieved a seminal victory before the European Court of Human Rights in the celebrated Ostrava case, *D.H. v. The Czech Republic*, a ruling echoed by the European Court of Justice in *Sampanis and Others v. Greece*. It remains, however, for national and European Court

of Justice judgments like these to be vigorously and fully implemented, and the United States remains concerned about the practice of channeling Roma into so-called “special” schools in Bulgaria, Croatia, Slovakia and Ukraine. These practices have resulted in separate but unequal schools for Roma.

Finally, I would note with regret that pervasive discrimination against Roma in employment – a phenomenon which has worsened in some countries over the past 20 years – has eroded confidence among some Roma that education really is a gateway to other opportunities. If Romani youngsters see that someone from their community who has stayed in school is still turned away from jobs simply because of his or her ethnicity, then why bother? It becomes harder to justify the time and effort it takes to stay in school, if that takes a child away from income-generating activities, and there is not even a whispered prayer of getting a job at the end of the line.

Madam Moderator, discrimination against Roma – the focus of these legal cases – is but one of many factors that impedes Romani participation in education. I hope to offer thoughts on other challenges in this field this afternoon. Thank you.