

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



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Human Dimension Implementation Meeting session on tolerance and non-discrimination focusing on Roma and Sinti issues

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Statement by **Mr Valeriu Nicolae**, Special Representative of the Secretary General for Roma Issues

Excellencies, Esteemed representatives of civil society, ladies and gentlemen,

It is indeed a pleasure for me to be part of the HDIM meeting. Since I started to play an active role in civil society more than 13 years ago, the OSCE has been consistently bringing the Roma topic into discussions at the highest levels.

During the last decades, there were many good, and some great, speeches about a better representation of Roma. Politicians, especially during public international meetings or conferences, agreed that more needs to be done in order to ensure the full participation of Roma men and women both in their societies and in political life.

The results since the adoption of the Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti within the OSCE Area in 2003 are not as good as those of us present at the signing were hoping for. Many within Roma civil society have a critical position and do not hesitate to accuse intergovernmental organisations and national politicians of just paying lip service to Roma empowerment.

There is, however, some clear progress. For example, in July 2015, the Romanian Government had five dignitaries of Roma origins, including two very influential Secretaries of State in key ministries. I was one of them. It is true that it is a technocratic government and that neither of us were involved in politics. There are high-level Roma people working in governments of many countries, many more than a decade ago. We have substantially more Roma involved in politics than in 2003 and some of the most important positions on Roma issues in intergovernmental institutions and international NGOs are occupied by Roma nowadays, a clear improvement compared to the situation back in 2003 when Nicolae Gheorghe was practically the only exception. We have had three Roma women MEPs since then and all three mandates of the European Parliament have seen Roma MEPs in Brussels. There has been a significant increase in the numbers of both Roma women and men who work for administrations at local, national and international level. Some Roma lead prestigious academic programmes and teach or study at some of the best universities in the world.

The question is if all of this is good enough. I would say clearly not. Roma remain hugely underrepresented in politics and decision-making positions in practically all national and international organisations from business to administration. This despite a major increase in the number of Roma who possess graduate and postgraduate degrees and the relevant professional experience.

Anti-Gypsyism continues to be largely unpunished and deeply ingrained in the societies of a substantial number of OSCE, Council of Europe and EU member states. The Council of Europe through the Secretary General, the European Commission through its Commissioners and Presidents, the UN and the OSCE have all been strongly talking at the highest levels of the need for eliminating anti-Gypsyism.

As long as racism against Roma remains acceptable and unpunished, our participation in our societies will always be limited.

Sure, we need to discuss about responsibilities and not just about rights. We, Roma and non-Roma, need to be more active as citizens of our countries, and social inclusion and participation need to be done together and not just by one group or the other.

In 2018, we will celebrate 15 years since the adoption of the OSCE Roma and Sinti Action Plan. The Action Plan remains a very ambitious document, a document for the future. Many, if not the overwhelming majority, of its recommendations are still very much valid.

The organisation I represent here today, the Council of Europe, has done a lot of work on Roma, we have been the most vocal intergovernmental organisation concerning the rights of Roma since 1969. Some of our programmes have been instrumental in promoting Roma empowerment. Our ROMED and ROMACT programmes in cooperation with the European Commission have focused specifically on the participation of Roma in decision-making processes at local level and also on political participation (with the Council of Europe's electoral assistance programme for local elections). The programmes invest in long-term objectives to move from dependency and paternalism to the empowerment and recognition of Roma, stimulating active citizenship and inclusive implementation of the principles of good governance and of participatory democracy.

The recently-adopted Council of Europe Action Plan for the Inclusion of Roma and Travellers (2016-2019) lists the fight against anti-Gypsyism as one of its top priorities.

But also we have not yet fully succeeded. Acknowledging that is not a sign of weakness but of maturity. Failures are part of our everyday life. Ignoring failures leads to their repetition. Instead, we need to learn from what we did not do right. All of us. So we can eventually get it right.

What should we do to get it right?

We need more Roma in mainstream political parties. This is something I hear repeatedly in many international fora. Moving from words to actions is

often something that most citizens accuse politicians and sometimes us, intergovernmental institutions, of not doing enough of.

A Charter Against Anti-Gypsyism open for signature by all political parties in the OSCE Member States, an idea circulated within the European Parliament and at the OSCE Conference on fighting anti-Gypsyism held in Berlin on 6 September this year, could help us achieve much better political participation of Roma in our societies. Especially if it includes responsibilities for the political parties to do just that – include Roma. It would require both the majority population and the Roma to try harder.

Sure, is not an easy thing to do. But nothing about the human rights of minorities ever was. In the past, many of us Roma here in this room were told that what we wanted, what we worked towards, was impossible to achieve. We are used to trying to change the “impossible”. To going against what many people thought to be a “normal” situation. Against people concerned with preserving the comfort of a shameful but widespread normality of Roma being second-class citizens in their villages, towns or countries.

Whenever we found allies in the past, which we did many times, both were winning. A Charter Against Anti-Gypsyism and a fair representation of Roma in our societies signed by all mainstream political parties in our countries is not at all impossible and is very much needed. There are some very good similar precedents.

This can be done. But it requires all of us to work together towards it. The 15th anniversary of the OSCE Action Plan could be a good time target for achieving it.

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