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Working session 9: Tolerance and non-discrimination II, including Roma and Sinti issues, including implementation of the OSCE Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti

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Dear Friends and Colleagues,

I am very happy and honored to participate in this Working Session. We are here today, 15 years after the adoption of the OSCE Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti, to try to take stock of the achievements and remaining challenges in the context of participation of Roma and Sinti in public and political life.

There is no doubt that progress has been made in certain aspects. First of all, there is an impressive catalogue of international standards and guidelines on Roma inclusion from various regional and international bodies. The need for Roma integration has been placed high on multilateral political agendas and in monitoring exercises. During the first cycle of the Universal Periodic Review mechanism at the UN Human Rights Council, over 25 per cent of all minority rights related recommendations referred to the situation of Roma.

International standards on Roma participation are clear today. They must be included in legislative bodies, municipal and government structures, the judiciary, criminal justice systems, law enforcement bodies, and all other relevant mechanisms, especially when their decisions affect Roma. On the other hand, today there are diverse platforms where various actions of ordinary citizens affect politics and the disappearing borderline between political and nonpolitical societal spheres stimulates various new forms of participation. Speaking up publicly on social media, taking part in flash mobs, casting a vote, joining a demonstration, signing a petition, or volunteering to support an electoral candidate are all examples and certainly Roma started taking a more active role in such initiatives.

The other area where massive improvement can be witnessed is the ever-growing number of Roma who finish high school and become college and university graduates in all fields of education, also thanks to the many national and international scholarship and internship opportunities. Furthermore, it is welcome that many Roma men and women have been hired to certain visible decision-making positions and OSCE in this regard and the continuous appointment of Roma professionals in the office of the OSCE/ODIHR Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues is a positive example to follow.

However, one must express disappointment and perhaps even bitterness regarding some areas where we seem to achieve so little and so slowly.

In several regions, public discourse on multiculturalism is becoming increasingly divisive, hateful, manipulative and dangerous and we must remain extremely vigilant. The conflation of race, religion, nationality or status is a common tool in populist propaganda, when certain politicians want to appear as saviors of a falsely claimed

homogenous national identity and culture, which has never really existed anywhere in modern history. They know too well that as long as people are busy analyzing their differences and are kept separate along ethnic, national, religious or linguistic lines, they will not be able to unite to demand the desired civil, political or socio-economic rights and changes, such as equal access to quality education, proper health care or ending corruption, to mention just a few. Unfortunately, animosity against Roma people amongst the elite also exists who might regard Roma with suspicion, reservation, doubt, prejudice, and constantly question their loyalty, professionalism or preparedness no matter how hard Roma work to prove them wrong in this regard.

Our challenge in safeguarding pluralism lies not only in countries where political will is lacking because of a manipulative agenda. There are many others that seemingly accept or even cherish diversity, yet fail to put in place even the minimum necessary guarantees to manage it. Unfortunately, government leaderships still struggle to put the so-called Roma issue into the right context and rights framework. Undoubtedly, Roma communities have specific challenges and, therefore, deserve a focused and dedicated attention to their plight. But one must not forget that Roma are indeed an ethnic minority group in the most traditional and classic sense of the term and must benefit from the wider minority rights framework. This framework is based on such pillars as the protection of existence and identity, non-discrimination and participation. Roma and Sinti are often portrayed through a simplified and generalized lens as one impoverished people which hinders their full integration. It is important that public leaders think outside the "poverty paradigm" and incorporate all aspects of minority rights into strategies that address Roma disadvantage, including the protection and promotion of Roma identity, language and culture and the guarantee of dignity and equality.

Political parties and platforms also struggle to get it right. If right-wing parties decide to engage with Roma, they often prefer to work together with some selected Roma individuals through whom they seek to demonstrate that by hard work and good behavior it is almost automatic that one gets higher in the social ladder. And while left-wing platforms support social equality and egalitarianism, they often treat Roma in a rather patronizing way believing they must be uplifted. Political parties need to be assisted to come up with the right approach and design appropriate outreach and inclusion strategies for the various Roma communities. They should realize the benefits of diversity and how it will help them expanding their constituency base.

Truth is, the number of Roma professionals in government structures is still alarmingly low. As higher we look in the hierarchical structure, the fewer Roma faces we will see. During the lengthy adoption process of the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies, which I had the honor to coordinate on behalf of the Hungarian Government during our EU Presidency in 2011, I could count on one hand how many Roma people I met at the negotiating table. This would be unacceptable if it was about other minority groups. Inclusion is not only about moral and legal obligations but efficiency too. Public officials must recognize that without the participation of Roma, they are less able to take vital decisions for the benefit of the entire society and their offices may be less trusted by Roma, who may be reluctant to access them, or discouraged from doing so. And it is not only that Roma people are still missing from senior leadership positions but very often there are no appropriate dedicated institutions that would be in charge of Roma integration with the required

independence, authority and corresponding budget. And what concerns me deeply is the obvious lack of open and systematic communication channels between decision-makers and Roma groups which would allow for example for prompt actions to be taken if early warning signs of violence and atrocities emerge.

Before I conclude, please allow me to say a few words about the very specific situation of Roma women who face some serious personal barriers and challenges which are caused by reasons deeply embedded in societal settings and structures. One needs to take into consideration that Roma women are often made feel inferior from a very early age which they often eventually internalize. This leads to their lack of self-confidence and discourages them from publicly raising their hands and voices and expressing their opinions. Support networks for Roma women might be narrower, role models scarcer, and their ability for self-advocacy can be hindered by the lower status that they are often assigned to compared to majority women. Until today, Roma women from more traditional communities are often afraid of being labelled immoral if they happen to participate in social gatherings without their husbands, especially if it happens away from their homes. Other societal pressures are also heavy. Roma women are often told that if they don't give birth to children or enough children, they will not be regarded as real Roma women. These all hinders their potential public activism and participation and must be redressed by targeted initiatives.

We must identify creative ways of encouraging Roma women to get into the world of politics, to arm them with all the necessary tools and right attitudes to survive and overcome difficult situations, to build their self-confidence so they are strong and vocal enough to stand up for the interests of their constituencies, and to assist them in balancing their career with the family duties at their homes. Public leaders must find ways to create Roma women support groups in the form of training, mentorship, career advising or peer networking. And I truly hope that today's discussion will lead us to some solutions in this regard too.

Thank you for your attention.