



United States Mission to the OSCE

Session 6: Roma and Sinti

As prepared for delivery by Nathan Mick
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Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Nathan Mick. I join this meeting as a Public Member of the United States Delegation.

As some of you may know, according to the United States Census Bureau, there are roughly one million Romani Americans, and I am one of them. We trace our roots to Romani communities from across Europe.

Although there are a few places in the United States with significant concentrations of Roma, we are, for the most part, fairly spread out across the country. Moreover, the United States has a first-past-the-post electoral system for the state and national legislatures that is different from the proportional representation system found in many of the OSCE participating States. There is no Romani party in the United States and, in my case, I have been working with one of the two larger mainstream parties in my country.

For the past eight years, I have been involved in political life, working for a Representative to the State legislature in Kentucky, serving as Deputy Chief of Staff for a United States Senator, and working as a member of campaign teams.

I am very happy to be here today and to learn more about the issues that Roma confront as we seek to increase our political participation as voters, elected officials and appointed government officials.

Mr./Madam Moderator,

Discussing the issue of Romani political participation is a little bit like trying to answer the question, "what came first: the chicken or the egg?" We assume that improving the political participation of Roma will help improve other problems faced by Roma.

This summer, there were protests by flower sellers in Romania (complaining about new regulations for street vendors) and by people with horse-drawn carts in Bulgaria (who are subject to new regulations designed to improve road safety). In each case, some individuals expressed the concern that new regulations regarding flower sellers and horse drawn carts may disproportionately impact Roma. If Roma were more involved in the policymaking process, would there have been different policies or regulations? I can't answer that, but I certainly think the *perception* of the policy would be different. And in political life, perceptions matter.

Mr./Madam Moderator,

There is an affirmative commitment of every single OSCE participating State to ensure that Roma can exercise their right to vote, and to participate in the political process in a non-discriminatory manner. As a result of the requirements of the Bosnian constitution, Bosnia and Herzegovina is the only OSCE participating State where Roma are, in effect, barred from holding certain high political offices, such as the presidency or Delegates to the House of Peoples. The United States strongly supported the package of constitutional amendments that was agreed among Bosnia's leading political parties in March 2006, which would have addressed this deficiency and allowed full political participation of Roma and others in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Unfortunately, the amendment package failed in parliament by just two votes. This remains a shortcoming that must be addressed.

The United States also regrets that the Bulgarian Constitution prohibits political parties established along ethnic lines from participating in elections, something that has been discussed in the ODIHR's past election reports on Bulgaria. While members of Bulgaria's Turkish minority have worked around this prohibition in practice, the continued existence of this formal prohibition may serve to chill the participation of Roma in Bulgaria's political life.

There is also a critical, even essential, relationship between the ability of Roma to be registered by municipal authorities as residents, the ability of Roma to get proper identity documents, and the ability of Roma to vote. If Roma are not able to register as residents of the places where they actually live, they will not be able to vote.

In this regard, I would recall the ODIHR's assessment reports on past French elections. These reports have noted that there are different voter registration processes for persons who have no fixed domicile than for persons with a fixed residence. In addition, while a six-month residency is normally required to register to vote, a three year-year residency requirement applies to *gens du voyage*. These provisions appear to disproportionately impact Roma and impede the ability of some Roma to register and vote.

Thank You.