

Gypsyphobia and Rroms' participation: breaking the vicious circle

**Contribution of the NGO "The Voice of the Rroms" at
OSCE Conference on Anti-Semitism and other forms of intolerance**

Cordoba, June 2005

The Rromani NGOs of France welcome the opportunity to participate in the "*OSCE Conference on Anti-Semitism and on other Forms of Intolerance*". Indeed, given the present-day context of Europe and the process of the enlargement of the European Union to the East, the situation of the Rroms in Europe – representing about 12 million people – needs to be addressed, above all in relation to intolerance, hostility, prejudice, violence and overt racism, which the Rrom minority has been confronted with on a continual basis in just over the past decade throughout Europe.

The plethora of cases before the individual European state judiciaries and some before the European Court of Human Rights as well, brought on behalf of the Rrom minority (individuals or groups) in this time frame, have involved police abuse; expulsion; violation to home and privacy; libel and defamation; community violence against the Rroms (going unpunished by the authorities of the respective states); violation of freedom of movement and overt discrimination. As a result, a number of OSCE member states have been condemned. Clearly, Europe still has a significant task ahead to improve the treatment of its largest minority group.

It is ironic that after a refusal of western European countries to take in the Rroms of the Czech Republic, Canada (known for its stringent asylum and immigration laws) accepted a good number of Czech Rroms refugees, on the principle of protecting their fundamental human rights. This is the same principle upon which the foundations of post-war Europe were laid and which the European Union, in fact, holds of paramount importance yet, in the last decade of the 20th century. The condemnations of the European Court towards certain European states have shown that this principle has been denied to the Rroms.

In light of these recent historical facts, the Rromani NGOs of France thereby make an appeal that the serious racism and discrimination against the Rroms in Europe, whether on a state, institutional or a citizen level, be considered as one of the major themes to be discussed at this OSCE conference.

The position of France is unique in that France does not recognize ethnic minorities on the principle that all citizens have the same rights and are equal under the same legislation. Yet intolerance towards the Rrom minority, overt discrimination, incitement to racial hatred against the Roma in the media, along with the rise of "Gypsyphobia", both in mainstream society as well as promoted by certain French media and certain French institutions, (which in fact go against the very principles of the French Republic), has reached a critical peak in France. This means that the constitutional principle of denying the existence of any minority in the country has not succeeded at all in eradicating hostile behaviour against *de facto*

existing minorities. In some cases it has made the fate of such minorities even worse by depriving them of a legal basis for making their voice heard on equal level with other parts of the population (identified according to their occupation, sexual orientation, ideological belonging etc.). This opens the doors to the development of "communautarisme" (community withdrawal and hostility), which is a severe social plague, often condemned by French authorities.

French ministerial level has affirmed that the three basic pillars of integration, neighbourhood action and partnership are being implemented in relation to the Rromani minority. This entails dialogue with the international and non-governmental organizations working in this area as well as dialogue with the Rroms, including networking the people and organizations concerned. One would have appreciated a consistent involvement of resource persons working on their behalf – not necessarily part of the NGOs, who are just recognized for their long-lasting and effective commitment and fieldwork results. Yet of fundamental concern for the Rromani NGOs and individuals in France is that so far, despite these pronouncements on ministerial level, not a single Rromani NGO, not a single Rromani group, and not a single person of Rromani identity has been contacted to participate in any such program. Furthermore, diverse projects have been presented to French NGOs so far by NGOs whose members are Rroms. These projects, such as promoting education of Rromani children, promoting Rromani culture and language, or combating racism against the Rromani community, have either been rejected or shelved by the non-Rromani French NGOs claiming to work with the Rromani community: this at a crucial time when on a French ministerial level the need for networking and cooperation of the French NGOs with members of the Rrom community and their respective NGOs in France has been underlined. Unfortunately people without any connection or experience with Rromani life have been appointed in some key-positions of some French NGOs committed to Rromani matters. As a result of these surprising "democratic choices (maybe elections?)", they are currently running the concerned structure, using public funds in a hardly responsible manner. Many proposals set forth by really active Rromani NGOs face repeated procrastination and this can finally also be a form of passive refusal.

The above issue is not the only aspect of an alarming worsening of the general atmosphere toward Rroms in France. The racist content in the program presented with the title "*Delinquency: the route of the Roms*", shown February 11, 2005, on channel five, represents a case in point. It clearly reveals the challenges to the Rromani community as a whole, as well as to the Rromani NGOs in France, active on a daily level in the combat against racism. The French television station was shortly after criticized in a letter sent by the Council of Europe, informed by the Rromani NGOs of France, "Rromani Baxt", "AVER against Racism", "The Voice of the Rroms" and "Ternikano Berno".

The above-named program that carried overtly racist remarks against the Rroms came only a few weeks after the Holocaust Memorial Day. Remarks that echoed Nazi Germany "*one cannot integrate [the Rroms] in a society of the type as ours, or "one stresses often and rightly so the criminality of the Rrom community."* have been pronounced in this program. Moreover, dedicating nearly one third of this show to general remarks concerning non-Rrom organized crime, while at the same time leaving the title on the screen "*Delinquency: the route of the Roms*", is irresponsible, if not criminal, and creates a context highly unfavourable and unjust towards the Rroms. In addition, there were several distorted pieces of information, which were brought in to justify the whole argumentation of the participants who were chatting between themselves without any person representing an alternative option. What can one say, a few days after the ceremonies of Auschwitz, in relation to these statements made

on French television to the general public, such as [quote] “one can integrate [the Rromani children] provided that one takes them out of their family environment, but personally I do not see a solution for the adults”?

In the context of the blatantly racist statements, such as these made in this television program, the French Rromani NGOs ask that Holocaust education, and the suffering of the Rroms and Sinti in the Holocaust, who were persecuted on the basis of their racial origin, be taught in schools to promote an adequate awareness of Rromani history and to combat racism against the Rromani community. The OSCE Action Plan on Improving the Situation of the Roma (Decision 566), under heading 5 of Improving Access to Education, § 71, also calls for [quote] “including Roma history and culture in educational texts, with particular consideration given to the experience of the Roma and Sinti people during the Holocaust” [end of quote].

It is perhaps indicative of the attitude in France towards the Rromani minority that no non-Rromani NGO, no other non-Rromani organisation, no government, no administrative body – and what is even more alarming no journalist, - with some rare exceptions, officially spoke out against this television program. There was a clear lack of any non-Rromani support in France on governmental, institutional or civil level. Support was not even forthcoming from any of the NGOs purporting to work in tandem with the Rromani NGOs. While the Rromani NGOs of France took actions, including towards the Superior Audiovisual Board (Conseil Supérieur de l’Audiovisuel) and court action on the grounds of incitement to racial hatred, the only written statement supporting the line of protest came from the Council of Europe. To date, the situation remains the same; no other support has been given. In order to eliminate wilful misrepresentation and racism perpetuated in the press and the media in relation to the Rromani minority in France, the French Rromani NGOs stress the need for the rigorous implementation of an ethical code of practice in the press and media so as to ensure that every individual member of a minority group, as well as the minority group as a whole is represented and treated in a just and fair way. This will be extremely useful not only for Rroms but also for any other category of the French population, who might be, in the near future, the target of such slanders, fabrications and specious arguments.

The main principle of the Plan of Action on improving the situation of Rroms and Sinti within the OSCE area is Rroms’ ownership in its implementation. There are at least two *sine qua non* conditions for this principle to be implemented:

- helping the Rroms and their NGOs to fully take part in the processes that involve them, which in the most of the cases means supporting a true, long term and efficient training of Rroms
- creating a favourable context for the implementation of different actions in terms of public opinion, which means, mostly, working with media and opening them to Rroms who would be qualified on an equal footing with their non-Rroms colleagues

In the current context of the multiplication of the initiatives at the international level, we hope that these urgent needs will be met in priority. We strongly believe that this is the most appropriate way towards improving the general situation of Rroms in Europe.