

# THE ODIHR CONTACT POINT FOR ROMA AND SINTI ISSUES AN OVERVIEW



OSCE OFFICE FOR DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS AND HUMAN RIGHTS

CONTACT POINT FOR ROMA AND SINTI ISSUES

ALEJE UJAZDOWSKIE 19 • 00-557 WARSAW/POLAND • TEL. +48 22 520 0600 • FAX +48 22 520 0605

E-MAIL: [OFFICE@ODIHR.PL](mailto:OFFICE@ODIHR.PL) • [HTTP://WWW.OSCE.ORG/ODIHR](http://WWW.OSCE.ORG/ODIHR)

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# WHAT IS THE CONTACT POINT FOR ROMA AND SINTI ISSUES ?

The OSCE, as early as 1990, was the first international organization to recognize the “particular problems of Roma (gypsies)” in the context of the proliferation of racial and ethnic hatred, xenophobia, and discrimination (Copenhagen Document). As a result, the Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues was established in 1994 within the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) in Warsaw. Headed since 1999 by Mr. Nicolae Gheorghe, a renowned former Roma activist from Romania, the Contact Point works to promote “full integration of Roma and Sinti communities into the societies they live in, while preserving their identity” (1998 OSCE Oslo Ministerial Decision).

With a view to realising this goal, a work programme is being implemented focusing on the advancement of the political rights of Roma and Sinti in the OSCE area, on acute crisis prevention and crisis management in post-conflict areas of South Eastern Europe, and on fostering and supporting civil society development among Roma communities in the Balkans.

In addition, the Contact Point

- ✧ provides policy advice to OSCE governments;
- ✧ acts as a clearing house for the exchange of information on Roma and Sinti issues, including information on the implementation of Roma-related commitments by OSCE participating States;
- ✧ enhances interaction between OSCE structures, governments, international organizations and Roma or Roma-related NGOs to develop synergies and common approaches; and
- ✧ collects information from OSCE countries on legislative and other measures related to the situation of Roma and Sinti and makes it available to the OSCE community and other international organizations.

Tasked by the 2001 OSCE Bucharest Ministerial Council, the Contact Point is currently developing an Action Plan aimed at further strengthening its ability to assist OSCE governments in fulfilling their commitments to improve the situation of Roma and Sinti in their countries.

## THE MAIN ISSUES

**POLITICAL PARTICIPATION** ☼ Strong ethnic and cultural Roma identity prevailing over a national identification with the countries of residence has resulted in a pervasive unawareness of how to influence their own circumstances through political participation. In addition, anti-Roma discrimination has contributed to a sense of alienation among Roma from political life of their countries.

**DISCRIMINATION AND RACIAL VIOLENCE** ☼ Anti-Roma bias has extremely negative effects on access to employment, education, housing and health care. In several countries, Roma have been targets of racial violence, including racially-motivated murder. Unlawful treatment of Roma by police is a widespread problem.

**EDUCATION** ☼ In many countries, Romani children encounter widespread discrimination and rejection in public schools. It is not unusual for these children to be forced into schools reserved for the mentally disabled. The future long-term consequences of which can be highly detrimental to positive advancement in the societies in which they live.

**LIVING CONDITIONS** ☼ Roma face widespread discrimination as regards access to housing and health care. The resulting extremely poor living conditions give rise to high incidence of disease and malnutrition.

### Background

The Roma and Sinti populations in Europe, also known as gypsies, migrated from India between the 9th and the 14th centuries. They dispersed across Europe and developed diverse communities, some with their own dialects. The language of the Roma, Romanes, is related to Hindi. According to estimates, up to 15 million Roma and Sinti live around the world, the majority in Europe. While nomadism was central to their culture, most Roma are now sedentary. Roma have been persecuted throughout their history and were victims of the Holocaust. While the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe at least provided social security, better educational and employment opportunities, and protection from open discrimination, the Roma were often pushed back into their role of second-class citizens after the collapse of communism in 1989. Many were caught in the crossfire of violent conflicts resulting from the resurgence of nationalism in Eastern and South Eastern Europe.

Discrimination and exclusion still characterize the lives of most Roma today, reflected in racist violence, unemployment, poverty, illiteracy and high infant mortality.

“Ten years after the iron curtain fell, Europe is at risk of being divided by new walls. Front and center among those persons being left outside Europe’s new security and prosperity are the Roma. In many countries, Roma have been decreed illegal residents on their own property, banished beyond municipal boundaries, and left outside the community of common concern. These are not isolated incidents, but widespread practices – sometimes systematic and on occasion systemic. To redress the long and hard experience of Roma requires, therefore, considerable attention, careful analysis, development of specific policies and commitment of adequate resources.” (OSCE report on the situation of Roma and Sinti, March 2000)

The ODIHR Contact Point addresses these issues either directly through its programmes, or by way of promoting the establishment of institutional frameworks at local and national levels designed to advise governments and administrations on policy-making on Roma affairs. In doing so, the Contact Point co-ordinates closely with other international organizations and NGOs, and seeks to involve Roma in all its activities.



The ODIHR Contact Point promotes the rights of Roma in South Eastern Europe

# PROGRAMMES

Besides its clearing-house and advisory functions, the ODIHR Contact Point carries out a wide range of project activities. Currently these activities focus on three areas:

- ✧ advancing the political rights of Roma and Sinti;
- ✧ addressing the particular problems of Roma in South Eastern Europe, and
- ✧ promoting international co-ordination and representation.

The Contact Point's project activities have been made possible through generous financial contributions and secondments from the European Commission and the United States as well as from Canada, the Czech Republic, Finland, Norway, Slovakia and the United Kingdom.

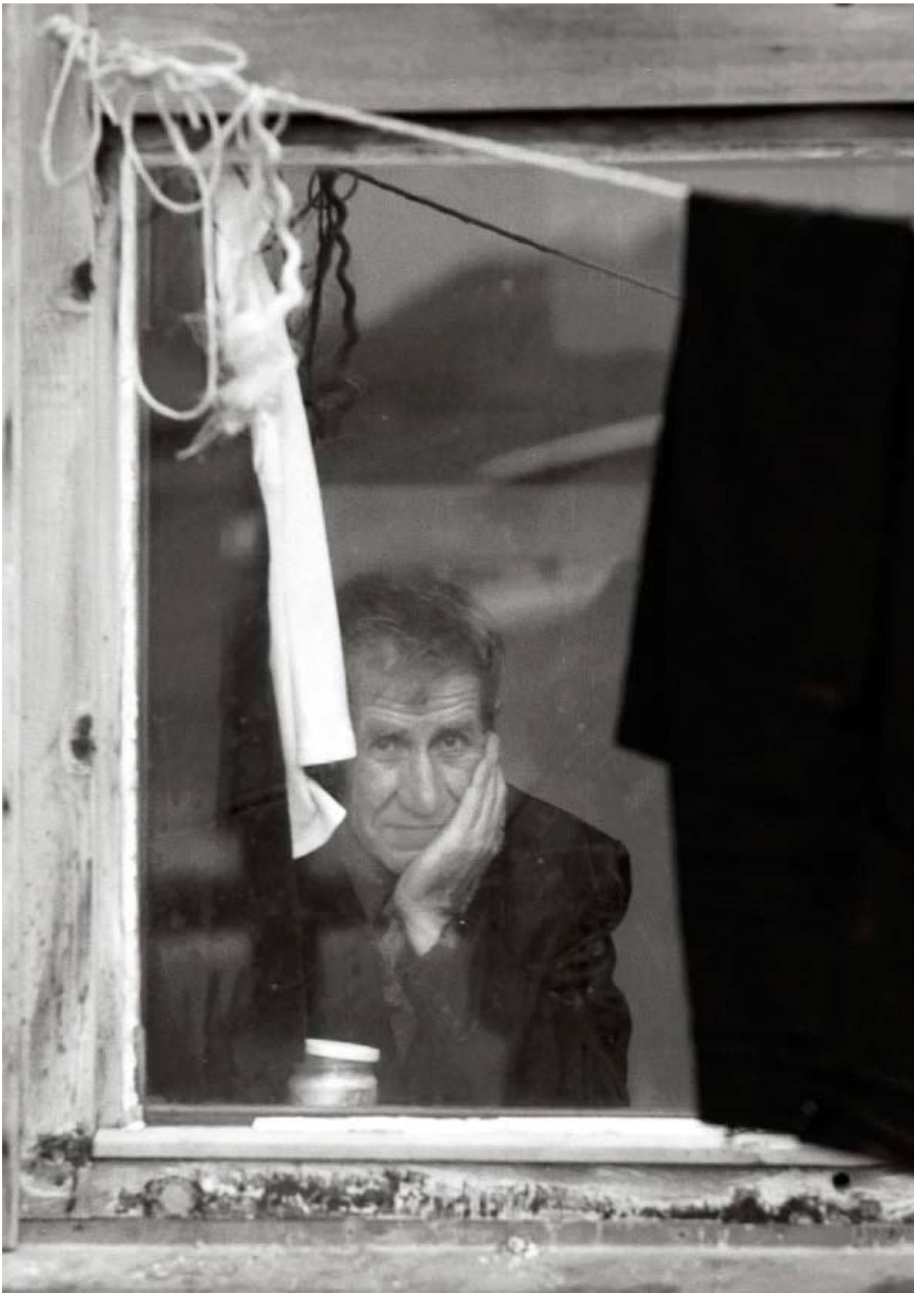
The Contact Point's website ([www.osce.org/odihhr/cprsi](http://www.osce.org/odihhr/cprsi)) features continuously updated information on all project activities.

## I. ADVANCING THE POLITICAL RIGHTS OF ROMA AND SINTI

In recent years participation of Roma in society in general, and political participation specifically, has become a reality. Nonetheless, the scale of participation has remained very limited. The number of Roma participating in elections, either as voters or as candidates, is still disproportionately low. With only some 11 members of parliament, 20 mayors and about 400 local councilors in the whole of Europe, Roma also remain vastly underrepresented in public office, in spite of constituting significant minorities in many countries.

Partially this underrepresentation is due to institutional obstacles and the general marginalization of Roma within the societies they live in. However, a significant contributor is a lack of knowledge by many Roma of their basic civil and political rights and the existing institutional means to make effective use of those rights to influence politics in their home countries.

Without coherent institutional representation, Roma are typically not involved in the decision-making processes aimed at improving their living conditions. Rather they find themselves being treated as mere objects of support and assistance by national authorities, aid agencies and international organizations. Notwithstanding this, there have been a number of initiatives recently by Romani organizations and various governments designed to improve representation structures and consultation mechanisms, both at the national and international levels.





In 1999, the Contact Point launched a multi-year programme for the advancement of the political rights of Roma. This programme is designed to increase the level of participation of Roma in elections at local and national levels - both as voters and candidates. A key objective of the programme is to facilitate access by Roma to policy-making on Roma issues.

## ROMA AND ELECTIONS

The Contact Point has been monitoring the participation of Roma in elections since 1999. In line with the objective of increasing Roma participation in elections, various activities have been devised. These include awareness raising programmes for Roma voters, training courses for Roma candidates and political parties, and the production of voter guidelines.

In Bulgaria, for example, the Contact Point launched a long-term education programme for Roma voters. The programme included the publication and distribution of voter guidelines in Bulgarian and Romanes, training workshops, participation of Roma in a network of domestic elections observers, and the development of post-election activities with Roma voters and elected members of parliament. Similar programmes have been implemented in several other OSCE countries.

Within the framework of ODIHR election observation missions, the Contact Point seconded Romani observers to monitor the participation of Roma in a number of elections in recent years. Among these, elections in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Moldova, Kosovo/FRY, and Ukraine.

The Contact Point also works to promote democratic structures and mechanisms, including elections, within Roma communities and their organizations themselves. It is hoped that such initiatives will increase the legitimacy of, and engender broad-based confidence in, Roma represented in various fora at local, national or international level.

## ROMA POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

For the first time ever, under the auspices of the Contact Point and in co-operation with the Czech Foreign Ministry, Roma parliamentarians and elected officials from across Europe met in Prague in December 2000. The purpose of the meeting was to develop common strategies to increase the participation of Roma communities in the political life of the countries in which they live, drawing in particular on the experience of Roma who have already been elected to office. The meeting successfully resulted in the establishment of a European network of parliamentarians, mayors and local councilors of Roma origin, and concrete plans for the creation of an expert working group tasked to develop proposals for follow-up action. It provided a first opportunity for close to 100 participants from mostly Central and Eastern European countries to exchange experiences and discuss strategies to improve the participation of Roma in the political life in the countries they live in.

## II. ROMA UNDER THE STABILITY PACT FOR SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE

Roma communities throughout South Eastern Europe were particularly affected by, initially, the collapse of communism and transition to market economy, and later the armed conflicts which marked the breakdown of the former Yugoslavia. In particular during the conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, Roma communities were frequently caught in the crossfire, accused of disloyalty by both parties to the conflict.

The Contact Point's two-year programme "Roma under the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe" is funded largely by the European Commission with additional support from the US, and is implemented together with the Council of Europe. The programme focuses on the following areas:

### ROMA IN ACUTE CRISIS SITUATIONS

The Contact Point monitors the situation of Roma in conflict areas and alerts the authorities and the international community when Roma are under threat of becoming victims of conflict. During the crisis in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in 2001, for example, the Contact Point played an active role in raising awareness of the particularly vulnerable situation of the Roma population amidst increasing ethnic tensions in the country. The Contact Point brought together representatives of the Roma community, the government and international organizations to create a forum for voicing the concerns of the Roma, and to explore ways to ease tensions.

### ROMA REFUGEES AND IDPs

Tens of thousands of Roma had to leave their homes during the recent conflicts in South Eastern Europe and now live as refugees or internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Serbia/FRY, and other countries of the region. While some of the refugees and IDPs have integrated into their host societies, others still live in refugee camps where difficult living conditions are often aggravated by tensions with the local population, including the local Roma population. The Contact Point, in close co-ordination with the UNHCR, assists Roma refugees with developing internal structures and capacities allowing them to effectively contribute to finding a durable solution to the refugee problem together with local and national authorities, Roma organizations and the international community. In a broader context, the Contact Point organized a series of national and international round tables on Roma asylum-seekers and ways to improve the living conditions in the countries of origin of Roma groups with a high degree of international mobility.

## LOCAL ROMA CONTACT POINTS

The ODIHR Contact Point is in the process of establishing a network of local Roma “contact points” throughout South Eastern Europe. The contact points are Roma hired by the ODIHR to act as intermediaries between Roma communities and local authorities. The purpose of this project is not only to improve communication between Roma populations and the authorities, but also to train young Roma professionals in preparation of possible future engagements in institutions and organizations dealing with Romani affairs.



A school boy in a camp for Roma refugees in Kosovo

## OVERCOMING FRAGMENTATION

The fragmentation of the group usually referred to as “Roma” or “gypsies/tsiganes” is one of the key obstacles of effective self-organization. The immense diversity of Roma or Roma-related populations in terms of ethnicity, language, religion, social status and cultural background often makes it difficult to agree on common approaches. The Contact Point works to overcome cleavages and tensions between the different sub-groups by acknowledging and openly discussing existing differences, while stressing the need for joint action based on common traditions and shared experiences. It is actively engaged in brokering agreements between different Roma or Roma-related groups and their organizations, including on electoral coalitions and joint policy platforms.

## SPECIAL FOCUS ON ROMANI WOMEN

Within Roma communities, women generally tend to be particularly disadvantaged. In view of this particularly vulnerable group, the Contact Point adopted a special mentor programme focused on the empowerment of Romani women. A number of experienced Roma women activists were tasked with passing on their expertise to groups of young women active in NGOs working on Roma issues. This reflects the general approach by the Contact Point to increasingly use know-how that already exists among Roma themselves, in particular in more advanced communities such as those in Romania and Bulgaria, and make it available to the next generation of Roma leaders and activists.

## CONFIDENCE-BUILDING AND NON-DISCRIMINATION

The Contact Point assists local and national authorities in creating mechanisms both to monitor relations between Roma and the majority populations at the local level, and take appropriate actions to prevent or alleviate tensions when necessary. Such projects, which include documentation and confidence-building measures, are currently implemented with a focus on urban and rural “ghetto” neighbourhoods, where there is a high concentration of Roma inhabitants. The Contact Point is developing a set of concrete guidelines and examples of best practices which will be made available to local authorities, urban planners, NGOs and Roma communities.

Another focus is ensuring equal access of Roma to housing and legal residence, which is a prerequisite for access to public services and civil rights such as the right to vote. In this context, the Contact Point is currently working on a compilation of cases of discrimination against Roma in the public domain. In the longer term, the creation of a database is planned including anti-discrimination legislation, institutional enforcement arrangements and relevant case law. The development of this database is hoped to provide a valuable resource for Roma institutions and communities.

### III. PROMOTING INTERNATIONAL CO-ORDINATION AND REPRESENTATION

#### EUROPEAN CONTACT GROUP ON ROMA ISSUES

The Contact Point initiated the creation of an informal European Contact Group on Roma Issues in 2000. The Contact Group brings together officials and contact points working on Roma issues in international organizations, including the OSCE, the Council of Europe and the European Union. It meets at least twice a year, often on the margins of relevant working group meetings of the European Council, to improve co-ordination on Roma issues between the respective organizations. In the future, the current arrangement is expected to be formalized, with the possible inclusion of Roma representatives.

#### INTERNATIONAL ROMA REPRESENTATION AT EUROPEAN LEVEL

The Contact Point supports the establishment of an international Roma representation at the European level. It facilitated the creation of a Roma Contact Group, in October 2000, which regularly assembles representatives of the two major international Roma associations, International Romani Union and Roma National Congress, as well as Roma experts and elected Roma parliamentarians and officials. The Roma Contact Group functions as a partner of international organizations in defining and implementing Roma-related activities.

The Contact Point has also been actively involved in the process of developing modalities for the creation of a pan-European Roma assembly with consultative functions, as proposed by the Finnish President, Ms. Tarja Halonen, in a speech before the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly in January 2001. In line with this, the Contact Point facilitates the participation of Roma organizations and representatives in the preparatory process for the creation of such an assembly.

## FUTURE PRIORITIES

The implementation of the OSCE Action Plan on Roma and Sinti Issues will be the Contact Point's main priority for the coming years. The Action Plan, which is currently under preparation, will further strengthen the Contact Point's ability to assist OSCE governments in fulfilling their commitments to improve the situation of Roma and Sinti in their countries. The proposed Action Plan contains recommendations on what governments can do to ensure that the Roma in their countries enjoy equal rights with all other citizens. The Contact Point will continue to advise governments on defining policies on Roma-related issues and its subsequent implementation. Supplementary to this, the proposed Action Plan also includes a set of concrete activities to be directly implemented by the Contact Point. These activities mainly build and expand on the Contact Point's experiences with its current work programme in the areas of policy-making, conflict prevention and management, elections and political participation, and international co-ordination and representation.

As much as the Contact Point's current programmes have been made possible through generous financial contributions and secondments, the success of the ODIHR's future activities within the framework of the Action Plan will also largely depend on the readiness of participating States and other donors to financially support the Contact Point's work.

The ODIHR's activities in the field of Roma and Sinti issues contribute to national and international efforts to promote tolerance and non-discrimination. As a mechanism for early warning, it has proven to be very effective in indicating increasing tensions and situations urging crisis management, in particular at grassroots level, in cases where tensions between Roma and the majority population have evolved into open conflict. The key overall objective of the ODIHR's work in this field is to promote enduring security and stability in the OSCE region by assisting in the development of truly inclusive societies in which all citizens, including those of Roma origin, enjoy equal rights.

### Credits

Photo page 6: OSCE Mission to Croatia

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