



OPENING ADDRESS

**by the Head of the OSCE Task Force, Ambassador Dr Boris Frlec
at the Joint International Conference on the Implementation of Policies /Action Plans for
Roma, Sinti and Travellers, and measures against the anti-Gypsyism Phenomenon in Europe
Warsaw, Poland, 20-21 October 2005**

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to welcome you to the Conference on the Implementation of Policies for Roma, Sinti and Travellers.

The number of logos on the invitation alone demonstrates that this meeting is an indication of the resolve of many states and international organizations involved in improving the situation of Roma, Sinti and Travellers on our continent and in helping them combat discrimination and outright anti-gypsyism. From the organizers, I am pleased to welcome

- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Poland
- The Council of Europe
- The European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC), and
- The OSCE ODIHR.

The meeting's purpose is to assess the current stage of the implementation of national strategies and policies for Roma as well as of several international initiatives on Roma, Sinti and Travellers, including the Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti within the OSCE Area; the Council of Europe's recommendations on Roma and Travellers; the European Union standards on human rights of Roma in member and candidate countries, and the "Decade of Roma Inclusion".

The decision to organize the meeting in Warsaw was made following the Council of Europe Summit which took place in Warsaw in May this year. The Summit adopted a Plan of Action, which pledges in its "Social Cohesion" chapter to continue to improve the situation of Roma and

Travellers in the member countries, and which summarizes and upgrades the numerous commitments and recommendations of the Council of Europe concerning Roma and Travellers.

Poland continues to have strong ownership of the process started by the Council of Europe Summit and I am therefore glad that this event takes place here. Poland is also the host country of the OSCE ODIHR as well as our annual OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meetings, thus offering an excellent opportunity for finding synergies among initiatives of all these international organizations, in particular in the area of policy making for Roma, Sinti and Travellers.

The OSCE plays an important role in improving the situation of Roma at the European level; let me mention some important turning points: the 1990 Copenhagen document, the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities Report on the situation of Roma and Sinti in the OSCE area of March 2000, and the 2003 OSCE Action Plan on the improvement of the Roma situation. What is of utmost importance in this regard are ties and cooperation with other international organizations – above all the Council of Europe, the European Union and specialized agencies – in the implementation of adopted documents.

A flexible approach to debate and intensive cooperation with governmental institutions as well as non-governmental organizations, particularly those representing interests of Roma at the international level, are the elements that form the basis of the OSCE special contribution to the discussion of the situation of Roma at the European level.

The first Human Dimension Seminar on Roma and Sinti, jointly organized by the Council of Europe and the ODIHR and held back in April 1994 resulted in a series of recommendations for policy making on Roma over the past decade. I hope this place will stimulate further debates that could generate a vision about how to continue the policy making process on Roma for the next decade.

I am happy to see that the list of participants is not only long, but also diverse, with representatives of governmental offices as well as local authorities from various countries, dealing specifically with Roma, Sinti and Travellers and /or with mainstream social policy issues; there is a large group of officials and experts coming from intergovernmental organizations and from the OSCE field missions. I am of course particularly pleased to welcome the many groups of non-governmental organizations, in particular those representing Roma, Sinti and Travellers themselves.

I believe that one of the most impressive achievements of the decade of policy making in this area is the growing number of elected and appointed officials at all levels of governance, recruited from Roma, Sinti and Travellers.

The agenda combines some commonly agreed priorities of the impressive number of co-organizers. One such priority is the engagement of local authorities and local communities as a whole in improving the situation of Roma, Sinti, and Travellers. I am confident that our debates in the next days will focus on how to implement international and national programmes at the local level. We must involve regions, districts, municipalities, urban neighbourhoods and village communities in this.

I can proudly say that both Poland and Slovenia can look back at substantial accomplishments in this area. Poland has launched a successful initial governmental programme for Roma in the Malopolska district (Southern Poland); in Slovenia, authorities joined forces with Roma representatives and devised a legal and institutional framework for the participation of Roma in local councils and local administrations of the communities where they form consistent groups. I hope that this meeting will serve to collect other good practices and hopefully generate some guidelines on what the OSCE Action Plan calls “an institutional mechanism for implementing policies at the local level”. Of course, the Council of Europe also has substantial and rich experience in working at the local level, among others through its Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (CPLRE).

It was the continuity of these efforts that enabled a comprehensive preparation of this meeting. Slovenia is geographically situated at the crossroads of various cultural flows; consequently, it has always been involved in important initiatives and activities aiming at the improvement of the situation of minority groups. However, the activities for the improvement of the situation of Roma have been seriously undertaken only recently, as has also been the case in many other European countries. During its 2004 CEI Presidency, Slovenia organised a meeting of the CEI parliamentarians on the characteristics of the Roma situation in individual countries; the meeting received a very wide response. Providing information about the development in each individual country undoubtedly contributes to the enforcement of the new practices at the national and local levels.

The protection of the Roma communities and improvement of their position is considered in Slovenia as an integral part of the democratic development of the community as a whole. The Programme on Assisting Roma was adopted at the governmental level a decade ago; some other programmes of employment have also been adopted, including a strategy of the Roma integration in the areas of education of 2004. The representatives of the Roma community are involved in the adoption of measures and strategies. Similarly to other European countries, the biggest challenge has been to eliminate prejudices and improve communication between Roma and the majority population.

The Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia contains a special article in this regard, and individual provisions have already been adopted on its basis. The Constitutional Court of the Republic of Slovenia has adopted a decision on the Roma participation in the governing of communities at the local level, that is in local municipalities. The **Local Government Act** was amended in 2002. Pursuant to this Act, there are seats reserved for the representation of Roma in municipal councils in 20 municipalities, where the Roma community traditionally resides. The Slovenian model for “guaranteed” participation of Roma in local municipalities has been developed on the basis of the method of protecting the Italian and Hungarian minorities living in Slovenia and guarantees a high degree of autonomy (in areas of health, education, housing) for national minorities. It might be useful to consider this model in current discussion about the decentralization and administrative reforms throughout South Eastern Europe, in particular in areas of post-conflict rehabilitation and reconciliation.

This meeting will address the phenomenon of racism against Roma, Sinti and Travellers, including its particular forms, known as “Anti-Gypsyism”. Regardless of terminology, it remains all too obvious that the effective implementation of international and governmental plans is seriously hindered by the intense prejudices and direct and indirect racism against Roma, Sinti and Travellers.

The destructive effects of such racist attitudes are clearly expressed in cases of violence against members of these communities throughout our region. Less visible but nonetheless destructive effects of racism are those entrenched in the practices of governmental and non-governmental institutions important for people’s daily lives. We still witness systematic mistreatment of Roma, Sinti and Travellers in the work of police, schools, health and employment institutions, and the mass media.

A much desired output of the meeting is to agree on how to achieve better interlinks and harmonization among the key actors on policy making on Roma, Sinti and Travellers and how to better coordinate our work.

The specific forms and tools of such harmonization remain to be defined by the participants themselves, so that we continue to maintain the advantages offered by the pluralism and competitiveness of initiatives and advance to a different stage of communication and coordination.

I hope that the meeting will also cover practical questions such as how to finance the implementation of policy programmes for improving the living condition of Roma, Sinti and Travellers by combining resources from national budgets, local budgets, international financing, and increasingly the contributions of the people themselves.

I look forward to serious discussions about the particular problems of Roma in Kosovo, about their current situation and their prospects, including the possibility for Roma and other small minorities to participate in the process of the determination of Kosovo status. We will also hear about a specific local project: the return of displaced persons and the reconstruction of Romani mahala in Southern Mitrovica. Hopefully the debates in this meeting of distinguished practitioners will provide useful guidelines for the officers in charge and for the Roma beneficiaries of this project.

As an implementation meeting, this Conference should provide an opportunity to take stock of what has already been achieved and how to sharpen the tools we all use to improve the situation of Roma, Sinti and Travellers in our societies and make them more effective. I wish us all fruitful and interesting discussions during the coming days.

Thank you.