

Working Session 6
Implementation of the OSCE Action Plan on Roma and Sinti
Statement by Tad Stahnke, Human Rights First

Combating racial and ethnic discrimination is at the heart of the OSCE Action Plan on Roma and Sinti, and this includes official action to prevent and respond to violence targeting Roma. Unfortunately in Human Rights First's current review of hate crime in OSCE participating states, we find that such violence exists in several countries across the region.

Individual Roma, like members of other visible minorities, suffer assaults in city streets and other public places. In a number of other serious cases of violence, attackers have sought out whole families, including children and the elderly, or even whole communities. These patterns of violence are sometimes directed both at causing immediate harm to Roma and physically eradicating their presence. Police and local public authorities are in some cases complicit in driving Roma from their homes and seeking their relocation to other towns or cities—or even their deportation.

Our report documents violence and other forms of intolerance against Roma in eleven countries during 2007 and 2008. The most widely reported incidents occurred in Italy, where mob attacks drove thousands of Roma from their homes, beating residents and burning Roma settlements to the ground, as police reportedly did not intervene in several cases to protect the victims. Violent incidents have also been reported in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, the Russian Federation, Serbia, and Slovakia. In many of these cases, no one has been held accountable for the crimes.

Bias-motivated violence against Roma often occurs in an environment in which local political leaders speak openly of their desire to expel Roma minorities. The presence of Roma in new places of residence, including as a result of migration within the newly expanded European Union, is often particularly precarious when bias turns Roma into a scapegoat for broader societal ills, as is the case in several of the countries profiled in our report.

HEADQUARTERS
333 Seventh Avenue
13th Floor
New York, NY 10001
Tel: 212.845.5200
Fax: 212.845.5299

WASHINGTON D.C. OFFICE
100 Maryland Avenue, N.E.
Suite 500
Washington, DC 20002
Tel: 202.547.5692
Fax: 202.543.5999

www.humanrightsfirst.org

The discriminatory violence of private citizens and the inadequate responses of governments are manifestations of a broader framework of anti-Roma discrimination. This extends to the full range of human rights. Even as public policy and private violence conspire to drive Roma from the shelter they make in camps and abandoned buildings, pervasive discrimination denies them access to legal remedies for the loss of homes and property and access to housing that could provide an alternative.

The intensity of the recent anti-Roma violence in Italy should serve as a wake-up call to all of Europe. The multiple factors at work: negative popular attitudes against Roma; abuses that Roma experience at the hands of the police; official and unofficial discrimination in employment, housing, health care, and other aspects of public life; violent rhetoric of exclusion and expulsion used by public officials; and the failure of many states to address the challenges of the marginalization of Roma—all combine to create a potentially explosive situation, with dire human consequences.

As our report shows, this combustible mix of factors exists in several European countries. Yet, we are aware of no official monitoring of hate crimes that includes disaggregated public data on violence against Roma even among the countries that have developed adequate monitoring systems on racist violence. Efforts to improve relations between Roma communities and the police are not well developed in many countries, and these steps are essential not only to end abuses committed by the police but also to encourage the reporting of bias motivated violence and to protect communities from that violence. As an urgent matter to counteract the impression that perpetrators can act violently against Roma with impunity, senior government leaders should send strong, public, and consistent messages that violent crimes which appear to be motivated by anti-Roma prejudice will be investigated thoroughly and prosecuted to the full extent of the law. These words need to be followed up with action to ensure that those responsible violence targeting Roma are held accountable under the law. Finally, participating states should ensure that ODIHR programs on hate crimes, for example the law enforcement and the civil society training programs, address issues pertaining to Roma.