



## **“Building Bridges – or Burning Them? The Escalation of Violence against Roma in Europe”**

**Hearing before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**

**Rep. Chris Smith, Chairman**

**February 15, 2012**

Good afternoon and welcome to everyone joining us this afternoon – particularly to our witnesses, who have travelled here from Europe to be able to testify today. We appreciate your dedication to the human rights and dignity of the Romani people, probably the most discriminated against and disadvantaged people in Europe today.

Roma, Europe’s largest ethnic minority, have faced discrimination and worse for hundreds of years. In parts of Europe they were even literally enslaved, as late as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when our own country was battling this evil, and, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, were the victims of German genocide during WWII – an estimated 500,000 Roma were exterminated by Nazi Germany and its accomplices.

In 1990 hopes for the democratic transitions underway were enormous – and the OSCE was likewise optimistic that it would play its part in ensuring that Roma would be equal sharers in the benefits freedom, democracy, and the free economy would bring.

But the 1990s were difficult years for Roma, who were faced with pogroms, murders and other acts of violence, and police brutality. With a view to that violence, I wrote to then-Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labour Harold Koh regarding Romani human rights and religious freedom – and urged the State Department to be sure that these issues were fully covered in the Department’s annual *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*.

The commission became increasingly active on Roma human rights issues. In 2002, we held a Helsinki commission hearing on the situation of Roma. And that same year, my resolution on improving equal opportunities for Roma in education was adopted by the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly.

Though about ten years ago many countries began to implement measures to stem the violence, resulting in fewer attacks and more accountability when attacks occurred, the sad fact is that these positive developments have not been sustained.

To make matters worse, in recent years there has been a terrifying escalation of violence against Roma, prompting to a Helsinki Commission to hold a briefing on this issue in 2009. The current wave of violence has resulted in horrible fatalities – like the murder of five-year-old Robert Csorba in Hungary, who, along with his father, was killed by sniper fire when they tried to flee their burning house which had been set on fire by Molotov cocktail.

There are many cases of horrifying violence against Roma: people have been maimed or disfigured for life, like the 13-year-old girl in Hungary shot in the face by the extremists who also killed her mother, or the toddler known as “Baby Nataalka” in the Czech Republic who was burned over 80% of her body in a Molotov cocktail attack. And as we discuss today the anti-Roma mob attacks and demonstrations that continue to occur in several countries, we should ask: what is the impact on families and children who huddle in their homes while a mob outside yells “Gypsies to the gas!”? Exactly this sort of thing is really going on – in the year 2012 Roma still have to face such open savagery.

Yet at the same time many governments are voicing serious concerns about the situation – one of the purposes of this hearing is to ask how well the solutions respond to the problem. Every EU country is now working up a “national strategy for Roma integration” – do these strategies respond to the real gravity of the danger threatening Roma?

Likewise our own State Department has prioritized the rights of the Romani people, and this has been implemented with real commitment by many ambassadors and human rights officers. Yet the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* have been uneven and so we will have to continue to watch them carefully – they should be a touchstone of our government’s commitment to the human rights of the Romani people.

Finally, we should also talk about humanitarian concerns. In the post-communist countries, Roma have been the absolute losers in the transition to market economies. Last year Hungarian Minister for Social Inclusion Zolton Balog

said that their situation is worse today than it was under communism. Over the past twenty years, Roma have been caught in a downward spiral accelerating at exponential rates. While they were at the bottom of the social ladder during the communist period, today they are often “off the grid,” living in shantytowns, urban ghettos, or segregated settlements. A UNDP report concluded that Roma in five Central European countries live in conditions more typically found in Sub-Saharan Africa than in Europe. But can governments really expect to make improvements with regard to other problems Roma face – in housing, employment, education and so on – if shocking acts of violence continue unabated?