

Helsinki Commission Briefing
on
The Human Rights Situation of Roma:
Europe's Largest Ethnic Minority

June 16, 2006
10:00 a.m.
226 Dirksen Senate Office Building

Remarks for Co-Chairman Christopher H. Smith

The Helsinki Commission has followed Romani human rights issues for many years now. We've held numerous hearings and briefings on these concerns, and I am very happy to have this expert panel with us today.

Clearly, there have been tremendous improvements for Roma across the OSCE region since the fall of Communism. Leaders like Nicolae Gheorghe (pron. NIK-o-lie Gey-OR-gey) have been instrumental in achieving that progress. The Helsinki Commission has worked closely with him for many years now -- Mr. Gheorghe, we commend you for your years of human rights advocacy, for your leadership, and for your outstanding service to the OSCE.

While the achievements of the past 15 years have been remarkable, no one should have any illusions about the work that remains to be done. In Russia, just in the past year, Roma have been the targets of brutal murders and pogroms. Tens of thousands of Roma from Kosovo remain displaced, living in a no-man's-land, unable to return and rebuild a life in Kosovo but not accepted as permanent refugees in the countries where they are now. Yesterday, we held a briefing on the situation throughout the Balkans, and we were fortunate to have Mr. Gheorghe specifically address the situation of Roma in that area.

And while these grave situations demands our attention, we must also work to combat the day-to-day racism and discrimination that Roma continue to face in much of the OSCE region. Even here in the United States, Roma continue to face some problems, including stereotyping in the media and racial profiling by law enforcement.

I welcome our panel of experts and the insights they will share with us on developments in Central Europe.