

ROMANI HUMAN RIGHTS: OLD
PROBLEMS, NEW POSSIBILITIES

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COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE
WASHINGTON, DC

The Commission met in Room 2200, Rayburn House Office Building, Washington, DC, at 10:00 a.m., the Hon. Christopher H. Smith, Co-Chairman, presiding.

Commissioners present: Hon. Christopher H. Smith, Co-Chairman, and Hon. Joseph R. Pitts, Commissioner.

Witnesses present: Nicolae Gheorghe, Section Head, Contact Point on Roma and Sinti Issues, OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR); Dimitrina Petrova Executive Director, European Roma Rights Center; Rumyan Russinov, Director, Roma Participation Project; and Elena Borislavova Poptodorova, Ambassador of Bulgaria to the United States of America.

**HON. CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH, CO-CHAIRMAN,
COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE**

Mr. SMITH. The hearing will come to order.

First, I want to thank all of you for being here this morning.

About a half year ago, Nicolae Gheorghe, who will testify before us today, was physically thrown out of a Warsaw restaurant. He went there in response to a report that Roma were being excluded from the establishment solely based on their ethnicity and, as he personally discovered, the report was all too true. Adding insult to injury, Poland's ambassador to the OSCE later defended this mistreatment, asserting that it was a legitimate public order measure. While there continue to be many improvements for the Roma, Mr. Gheorghe's experience at that Warsaw restaurant demonstrates that there continue to be many injustices.

As yesterday, April 8, was marked in many countries around the world as International Roma Day, it is particularly fitting that we have this hearing at this time.

We welcome the opportunity to hear today about the OSCE's activities in the area. The Commission has held a number of hearings where we have been fortunate enough to have OSCE Heads of Mission or other OSCE officials participate, including the Chairman-in-Office last year. Each of these opportunities helps us greatly in our understanding of the challenges that the OSCE faces for the Roma and for other human rights and democracy issues.

This is also the third Helsinki hearing focusing on Romani human rights issues, and with it we hope to move from the general to the specific. Ms. Petrova will discuss the different kinds of barriers to education that Roma face. Mr. Russinov will discuss the situation in Bulgaria, in particular concerning a very encouraging model program in the town of Viden. We will hear an additional perspective on the situation in Bulgaria from the ambassador of Bulgaria to the United States.

At this point, I would like to yield to my good friend and fellow Commissioner, Mr. Pitts, the gentleman from Pennsylvania.

**HON. JOSEPH R. PITTS, COMMISSIONER,
COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE**

Mr. PITTS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for holding this important hearing on the problems facing the Roma throughout Europe.

Unfortunately, as clearly documented by various organizations, ethnic persecution and discrimination persists against the Roma in most nations in Europe; stereotypes of the Roma abound throughout Eastern and Western Europe. Unfortunately, there is not overwhelming evidence that the majority ethnic groups in Europe desire to help end these stereotypes and the racism that do exist.

As many experts and journalists have reported, educational opportunities and reform of educational systems appear to offer hope for bringing positive change for Roma children. News articles over the past few years detailed the common attitude toward Roma students, and I will give you a quote. "The special schools are right for most Romani children. They are more comfortable there. We assume these children will not be any kind of scientists or studying types. Their calling will be the manual crafts," end quote. Now, there is nothing wrong with children learning manual crafts, but there is most definitely something wrong with assuming that simply because a child is Roma in origin he or she will not be, quote, "scientists or studying types," end quote. Another educator stated—here's another quote—"the fact that so many Romani children go to special schools is not a mark of discrimination. It is a matter of intelligence." An appalling and very disturbing statement that oozes racism.

In the early 1990s, one of my staff members lived in a small town in Romania while teaching English classes. When she arrived in the town many of her students warned her to be careful of the Gypsies, as they called them, because they said they were dirty, dangerous, violent, lazy and thieves. My staff member challenged these attitudes. During the class discussions the students protested that all those things they said were correct. Only one student said, "I never thought about this before. I was always taught that this was true. I have to think about this." Sadly, most of the students did not feel challenged to think about the views that had been passed on to them and accepted without question.

Education is the key to bringing positive change to individuals' lives. I commend the work of the people in Bulgaria for their efforts to bring change. I look forward to hearing from our distinguished witnesses.

Again, thank you, Mr. Chairman for holding this hearing.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you very much, Commissioner Pitts.

Let me introduce our first witness, Nicolae Gheorghe, who is the head of the Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues at the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, ODIHR. Prior to his appointment to that position, Mr. Gheorghe was a senior researcher at the Institute of Sociology in Bucharest.

He was also active in establishing and participating in Romani human rights organizations, including Romani CRISS, the Romani Center for Social Intervention and Studies. As a nongovernmental representative, he has been an advocate for Romani rights at United Nations, the Council of Europe and the OSCE, and was instrumental in lobbying successfully for recognition of Romani human rights problems in the OSCE's 1990 Copenhagen Document. He received the Human Rights prize of the National Commission of Human Rights of the French Republic in 1992. Mr. Gheorghe has published and lectured extensively in Europe and in the United States on Romani human rights issues. He has been commissioned to prepare reports for, or serve as an expert consultant on, projects for the European Commission, the Council of Europe and UNICEF. He has also served on the Council for Ethnic Accord of the Project of Ethnic Relations, and the board of the European Roma Rights Center in Budapest. Mr. Gheorghe was educated at the University of Bucharest. A Romani national, he speaks Romanian, Romani, English and French, and has a reading knowledge of German. Presumably, he'll be testifying in English.

Mr. Gheorghe?

**NICOLAE GHEORGHE, SECTION HEAD,
CONTACT POINT ON ROMA AND SINTI ISSUES, OSCE OFFICE
FOR DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS AND HUMAN RIGHTS**

Mr. GHEORGHE. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Because you were so successful in organizing this hearing just on the day when we celebrate International Romani Day, I would like to greet you, to say thank you. So it is a special day for us.

I was really touched that you started your presentation recalling the incident that I witnessed and I was a part of in Warsaw. I just want to say to you that the last echo of that incident was that we started to collect similar cases of Roma people who were ejected from the bars, discotheques, theaters, and shops over the last years in different states of the OSCE, and whose cases were successfully brought to the court, and a sentence was reached, condemning these kinds of acts as motivated by racial or ethnic intolerance. So, soon the Contact Point will make that available. That is my small vengeance for the act in which I suffered.

I will say that because also coming here, I remember what we have accomplished over the last years, exactly since we testified before your Commission. I would like to check with you here one of the feelings that I have, of being now each day involved in Roma issues, and being paid now as an officer.

Sometimes I have questions about the effectiveness of our work. One answer that I received recently was offered in the book published by a legal researcher from the Netherlands. It is called *International Supervision of Protection of Romani People in Europe*. It's a very fresh book, and documents all the references to Roma issues in the reports which are submitted to the different bodies of the United Nations, of the Council of Europe, their treaty bodies, monitoring committees and so forth.

So over the last 10 years, there has been a remarkable increase in the awareness of Roma issues and the preoccupation of different monitoring bodies with how the rights of Roma are implemented by the governments of the states whose citizens or residents they are. So it is an impressive and somehow unexpected discovery that Roma are not ignored now, 10 years after the Copenhagen meeting.

But the question is always: what is the relation between these activities which are undertaken by international organizations, and everyday life? How do these activities of organizations like mine, in which I'm serving, or yours, how do these relate to people and improve their situations on the ground? Here I have questions sometimes, and question marks and doubts. Coming here, let me say last year we were invited to search for our roots in India. We were invited by a Hindu heritage foundation exactly a year ago. I came here to look for another root, which is my political identity.

I will take some minutes of my time just to recall for you, one influence was the Copenhagen commitment in 1990 when the OSCE participating States—in Article 40—clearly and unequivocally condemned totalitarianism, racial and ethnic hatred, anti-Semitism, xenophobia and discrimination against anyone, as well as persecution on religious and ideological grounds. In this context, they also recognized the particular problems of Roma, Gypsies.

So this was, from my point of view, in my personal history, the breakthrough with the Roma issues and the awareness in the international commitments. Since then we have built on that, both in the OSCE and in other international organizations, and, of course, at the level of states. I also quote this paragraph here, because for me it is almost impossible to commemorate or to celebrate the Roma in this country without mentioning what happened on the 11th of September last year in your country, as it is out of ideological fanaticism, of intolerance, of hate.

Since then, when I mention to my colleague and, I hope, friend, Erika [Schlager of the Commission staff], I connect now in my mind when I am working for the Roma issues, for the small things that are happening to the people on the ground, I have in mind that we are part of a much larger battle against totalitarianism, against intolerance, against hate, motivated by racial or religious intolerance that can be so destructive, as we witnessed last year in your country. It is so destructive in smaller levels in everyday life of our people in the countries where we happen to live.

It happened that last year, when we had the OSCE conference on Roma in Bucharest, it was from 10th to 13th September. It was the afternoon on the 11th of September when we got the news about what happened in New York and in Washington, and again, for me, for the rest of my activities, these two events will somehow remain connected in my mind. I can report to you different activities and achievements as an officer in the OSCE office, but I would like to bring to you here a sense of worry that I have—an anxiety that I have in myself. In full responsibility, I will share it with you.

We are doing many wonderful things and projects, programs, reports, court cases, and so on. The discovery of that book when I read it is that while we are advancing on the level of international organizations, on acknowledging Romani issues, formulating commitments, taking mea-

asures, and enacting state policies, on the ground the situation has deteriorated. We have to confront this situation, how this happened and why.

On the institutional level, we have advanced. We have progress. In real life, the reports that we have and the emotions that people are confiding to us, they indicate deterioration of the situation. So it is a gap that I think we have to focus on, to try to understand, and to see how can we fill the gap with more effective action and more mass scale action. You mentioned in your introductory statements, distinguished Congressman, the program that our colleagues in Bulgaria and in other countries are currently working on, desegregation of the schools. I think that this is a major program and has to be fully supported, because of its long-term results. Meanwhile, I would like to signal to you my perception that the continuous segregation of Roma continues to consolidate in many countries. We are starting to construct, in the center of Europe, a color line, so the Roma are "black" and others are "white." This is becoming ever more consolidated and operating in everyday life.

It is a combination of social processes, economic factors and demographic ones which are pushing Roma more and more to the margin of the cities, in separate residential settlements, in ghettos. I say that we have to learn how to handle this reality. Maybe I'm biased, since I came to you to share with you my perception.

There are an increasing number of evictions of Roma from the houses in which they are. There are ever more announcements by local mayors, and even decisions of the local councils, and even a referendum of the population in some localities, to evict Roma from where they are living, to put them in so-called "social houses." In my country, Romania, in some cities, such "social houses" are organized in former barns, former barns which are now reorganized as "social houses" at the margins of the cities. I think that this phenomenon, in spite of our measures, will continue, because of a number of processes, factors, questions and answers; maybe we can elaborate on that. Because of a demographic increase of Roma, which is one of the highest rates in Europe, the number of people who will be living in such segregated areas will increase. We have to live with this reality.

From my point of view, I started to look at the tension of elements that is evolving there, at what may generate conflict, because of this social segregation between groups of people whose past interaction is that of hostility. At the root of the Roma problem are very deeply ingrained stereotypes, prejudice, hostility, and, actual hate. It is a long-enduring institution; it is a passion that we have to learn how to tackle to change this passion, as it happened many times in history. Now it is time we have to learn how to handle it, at best, how to control this combination of emotions, which are explosive from time to time.

It happened in Bulgaria, in February this year, in Stolipinovo, in Plovdiv. It happened in my country last year, in November, with the mayor of Piatra Neamt, who announced a plan to evacuate all the Roma from the city. We can give hundreds of examples from the publications of European Roma Rights Center, the unsleeping watchdog that reports all these things.

What I wanted to do to bring this to your attention as a security issue and as an issue for stability, that is, we have an element of tension and of destructive conflict. How can we tackle this in the future years? This is why we are spending our time on this issue. On, let us say, a day-to-

day basis, I just warn you that such a element may come in Moldova soon, because of the conflict issues there and because Roma in Moldova are caught in something that can degenerate into a conflict like the one in Kosovo or in Macedonia last year.

Already Roma of Moldova are starting to look for refuge in Romania, or in other countries of Western Europe, which is a sign. I wanted to bring to your attention a new area of violations of Roma is freedom of religion in some countries dominated by the Orthodox, but by Catholics churches too. Roma who are joining Evangelical churches are starting to be persecuted. The churches in Leskovac, in Serbia, in Novi Sad were attacked, were ransacked. There is quite high intolerance in Greece toward the Roma who are Muslims, some of them. So I think that this area of human rights, which was not usually on our agenda, will start to take a higher profile.

I have also started to look increasingly at the right of Roma to exercise their freedom, to participate freely in elections, and I noticed recently limitations of this right in a well-consolidated democracy, like in France. The Travelers or the *Gens du Voyage*—this is how they are called there because they do not recognize officially Roma or *Tigan*—because of a complicated law and an elections apparatus about which I can give you details, they have difficulties getting on the electoral list, registering in equal conditions with others, and, actually, according to my information, most of them are out of the electoral system.

This lack of participation in elections is also a situation that I encountered in the Netherlands, and I will try to explore in other countries. Not to mention the situation in Eastern European countries where we have new democracies. So there are new elements, new categories of rights that we try to observe, to monitor and to try address in our action.

I offered information about this in a written statement which was distributed. I am currently working on what will be the OSCE Action Plan on Roma and Sinti, which was a decision of the Ministerial Council of the OSCE in December last year. We have a draft on that which will be submitted to your attention for comments and further suggestions. I hope that by adopting this document, toward the end of this year, hopefully during the Chairmanship of Portugal, we'll have a more solid, consolidated base to increase the effectiveness of our work.

I will mention also here, in asking advice, how can we try to cope with the situation of a large number of Roma becoming citizens of European Union, with the expansion of the European Union into a number of countries like Slovakia, Hungary, Czech Republic and to a limited extent, Poland. But there are even larger Romani populations in Bulgaria and Romania which will some time later be members at the European Union. How can we continue to strengthen the monitoring system of the OSCE in these conditions?

I received the opinions of some state representatives from some EU candidate countries, that with the enlargement achieved, which means toward the end of 2003, 2004, the existing monitoring of the political criteria for the enlargement, which was set in Copenhagen in 1993, will stop, will cease. Without dreaming the situation of Roma will be improved in 2 years—on the contrary, as I mentioned, in some situations, it is deteriorating—we have to ask ourselves, how will we continue to monitor the situation of Roma in these countries that are supposed to be, by now, consolidated democracies with human rights well respected

and well established? How can we continue the monitoring and effective follow-up of these things after what will be the formal enlargement of the European Union?

I heard the opinion from some states that the OSCE is not supposed to mix too much in this process of European enlargement, which is a European Union process. I would like, again, just to ask your advice, how can we continue to use our mechanisms and our political force to monitor, to keep the situations of Roma and of minorities in general high on the agenda of the candidate countries to European Union, and of those who will be new members of the European Union in a coherent approach? I will stop here, and I hope that during the questions and answers I will have the chance to elaborate some of this. Thank you.

Mr. SMITH. Mr. Gheorghe, thank you.

Just to provide at least the beginning of an answer to the question that you lay out, I think it is important that the OSCE not take a back seat to other institutions in Europe, especially when it comes to human rights, and especially when it comes to the issue of the Roma. It seems to me that very often other geopolitical considerations will crowd out a consideration of human rights. Trade routinely crowds out that consideration in our own policies—in the United States, when it comes to human rights, in linkage to trade with China or other countries. The protestation of human rights always needs to be seen in isolation.

You are in a unique position, and the OSCE is in a unique position, because of its track record and despite past failures that all of us have experienced, really to speak out boldly and to be a nuisance if necessary. If other European countries find that to be unpalatable, tough.

Because, you know, their track records individually and collectively—as with this country, the United States—had a very dismal record when it came to race relations, especially with regards to African-Americans. I think the squeaky wheel does get the grease. I would encourage you to be even more bold going forward, despite the impoliteness that it may suggest to the diplomatic community which loves to just keep things on an even keel. Make note, “do not ruffle anyone’s feathers.” I have seen that approach for 23 years in Congress, in so many situations where human rights always get placed in the back seat.

In Romania, I remember so well during the early 1980s, when everyone at our own U.S. State Department spoke so glowingly of Nicolae Ceausescu. They said, “Oh, he has his faults, but at least he has a different foreign policy vis-a-vis the Kremlin. You know, somehow he’s independent.” It all turned out to be a ruse, as we all know, in retrospect. Plus, he had the Securitate which, as you know so well, was one of the most brutal secret polices.

But going back to the mid-1980s, when Dorothy Taft and I and others worked very hard on the issue of Most Favored Nation status for Romania and its revocation because of religious persecution and torture, we were soundly chastised by the know-it-alls in the State Department. Many of them do know a lot, but very often I think their willingness to go along, to get along, blinds them to human rights abuses that have to stay center stage. So I encourage you to be even more bold. You have been bold, and I just want to encourage you: Don’t take a back seat. I think for the sake of the OSCE itself, the more assertive we are collectively, the better. We do have a unique role: The Helsinki Final Act was

a unique document in humankind. All the more reason why going forward, our actions need to be more focused, to answer your question. At least a partial answer—now I'm the witness.

I do have a few questions I would like to ask you, Mr. Gheorghe. As you know, the denial of citizenship to Roma in the Czech Republic was one of those issues that got this Commission even further and further engaged when the situation was so blatant. Political participation is an issue that you are very much involved with. Do the Roma have the opportunity to participate? Is that getting any better in some countries? As we know, they make up to 10 percent in Slovakia, for example, and could be a potent political force if a) they were registered and enfranchised to cast their votes and ballots. They would make the difference particularly in the upcoming parliamentary elections. According to the report of just 2 years ago—and I know the role you played in this, in the area of education—the problem is enrollment. Romani parents very often cannot even enroll their own children in school. Once they are enrolled, they get tracked into those special schools. One of the more disturbing quotes out of that report was that approximately three-fourths of the Romani children attend special schools for children with light mental defects, and more than 50 percent of all pupils attending special schools are Romani children. As you point out in the report, that is a particularly pernicious type of discrimination, because it tracks them as somehow having defects when indeed they do not. This classification leads to horrific outcomes for those kids.

Mr. GHEORGHE. Thank you very much for the question, sir. So indeed political participation or Romani electoral participation has become a priority in our work, in my work, taking advantage of the fact that the ODIHR has a strong section for observation of elections. So we started a program for addressing Roma as voters, as candidates in the elections, as founders of political parties, and as elected representatives.

Over the last years we have now seven Roma who are members of parliaments, the national parliaments: two are in Bulgaria, two in Romania, one in the Czech Republic, one in Latvia, and one is the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. We have about 40 elected mayors and two vice mayors and a couple hundreds elected members in local councils. So it is a very small number in comparison with large demography of Roma; nevertheless, we would like to highlight this aspect of Roma participation vis-a-vis elections. There are a number of obstacles to that. First, as you mentioned, is the obstacle of getting on the electoral list. One obstacle is the fact that sometimes identification papers are not so clean as required by the administrative procedures.

So the citizenship issue, as you mentioned, is just one, and we have to follow up on that of those who benefitted from amnesty after the revised law in Czech Republic, but we have to see if they have the right now to participate in elections this year, it is a case study that has to be done. We have the situation of Roma living in housing and in settlements which are formally illegal because the land is not legalized, and therefore they do not have legal IDs, and as such they cannot be on the electoral list.

So there are administrative obstacles for many of them to enter in the electoral process as such, and we are addressing these issues from country to country, trying to find solutions in particular cases. Then there is an evolution of the electoral policy of Roma. There are ethnic Roma parties that try to participate in elections as such. This is the case in

Macedonia. If you give me a minute, I would like to take a careful look how the electoral law in Macedonia is drafted now, because the new implementation of the proposal for the new law will disadvantage the minorities. In fact, having the country cut in six or eight electoral districts will make it almost impossible now for a small minority to be represented in the parliament, to collect the number of votes needed. The Roma party was able to send one or two MPs previously in the municipality of Shuto Orizari near Skopje because there is a unique situation when there are 40,000 Roma in one place. But now the country will be cut into different electoral districts, so it will be difficult for minorities to reach the threshold.

There are some alternative proposals now to facilitate the representation of the minorities in the Macedonian parliament to avoid creating a binational parliament in a society which is multinational per se. So here is the moment, the time to intervene, and in the spirit of the High Commissioner for National Minorities Lun, recommendations and the ODIHR Guidelines to Assist National Minority Participation in the Electoral process, I think that we can try to preserve in Macedonia the possibility for representation of minorities in the parliament, in this case of Roma.

So, what I wanted to say, is that in Macedonia there is a little bit of political wisdom that was accumulated by Roma parties in the way to compete in the elections. In Romania and in Hungary, now we assist coalitions—political coalitions, mainstreaming Roma representatives into the mainstream political parties, so we'll see what will be the final outcome of the elections in Hungary. But in any case, it seems there will be one or two Roma MPs on the list of both competing parties.

In Romania, as I mentioned, the Roma Party is practically in a sort of executive coalition with the mainstream party which controls the Parliament, and that generated an outcome in the speed with which the program for Roma was adopted. We'll see how it will be implemented.

Slovakia is an interesting case, and I think that it is a test for many of us, because there is a concentration of Roma in eastern Slovakia which makes them an important or potential electoral constituency. As far as I know, now Vladimir Meciar's party is courting the Roma vote and promising seats for the Roma on his list. So we are seeing that in that country we may concentrate our attention. I have contacted NGOs—also American Freedom House has programs in the country—regarding how to actively train the Roma voters in Slovakia: first, to be registered to vote; second, to know how to vote correctly; and, third, to know for whom they are voting. So we have a couple of months before the elections to try to make the Roma voters of Slovakia significant, effective and productive for electoral participation in the country.

As I mentioned to you, regular participation of Roma in consolidated democracies is much less remarkable than in Eastern Europe, because of number of factors. We are much more heavily concentrated in the East or Central Europe, making an electoral constituent which is more coherent. Nevertheless, also there is a tradition of social exclusion of Roma in Western democracies, including European Union countries. I was amazed being in France and the Netherlands recently, just some weeks ago, to notice the electoral illiteracy of some Roma and Sinti people with whom I spoke, people who never heard about voting. They were never approached as voters in a country like France. So it was a little bit odd that myself, who grew up in Romania, I started an open

debate with Roma and Sinti in France about voter participation. I think that it will be not now, entering the elections in April and June, when we make a difference. When the electoral list will be again open in France by the end of the year, a number of Roma, Sinti, Travelers, and Manoush will start now to register on the list. It is a requirement in the French law that if you are a Traveler with a license, you need 3 years to be attached to a commune. The number of those administratively attached cannot be more than 3 percent of the population, in order to avoid so-called electoral manipulations. It is a clear differentiation and even discrimination in the way that other citizens of the country are treated in the context of the electoral laws. So we hope to raise this issue during the human dimension meeting in September with French authorities to redress this situation. I think that one of the long-term, promising activities, which is time-consuming—is to educate Roma as voters in their countries, as participants in the electoral system, to play responsible roles in electoral and political parties. With that, I will move to the second question. I do not want to say more, since my colleagues can say more than me. But here, again, if you encourage me to be bold, I will say that while condemning the practices of the school system and trying to alter them and to crack down on the mechanism of exclusion, I think that we have to work more with the Roma parents, too; there is a responsibility of the Roma themselves in taking the road of education. As you said, there are some parallels, with your country. I found this parallel easier, because my group of people, the *Tsigani* of Romania, were formerly slaves in the Romanian Principalities for several centuries, which is similar to the history of African-Americans here in America.

I think that one major road to improve the situation is education. But from this point of view, we have to work intensely with Roma parents, we have to change some mentalities at that level, too, to facilitate and increase the number of children, the young people who are attending the school system.

What is happening now in the 1990s is that an increased number of the Roma drop out of school. For a number of circumstances that we can document, there are, in the communities that used to have a higher number of Roma going to school, now we have fewer Roma going to school, and we have to confront that. It is the responsibility of states now to tackle this phenomena and to see how can it be solved. There is also a tendency in some countries in transition that Roma who are settled have again become nomads; they take again their itinerant, nomadic way of life.

In my personal view, I am not against that. I think that this is one way to release the demographic pressures in those pockets, in those ghettos that I mentioned to you. While mobility is an important right that has to be expected to assure the possibility for people to improve their life, we have to consider in case some group of Roma become, again, Travelers, how can we bring education to them in these conditions? How can we adapt the school and educational system to the new condition of Travelers? I will close by saying that what I notice in case of Roma in Romania, for instance, who became Travelers now in France and are starting a new life as Travelers with children in the caravan, they are completely out of school there. I made mention of the freedom of movement. I hope that again my colleagues from the European Roma Rights Center will elaborate more. One points in the OSCE, when we

wanted to keep a precedence, an advantage in relation to other international organizations, was to defend the right of freedom of movement and to criticize any kind of administrative and legislative measures taken by some states, especially some European Union states, to limit the movement of some category of people. Last year, there was an infamous act adopted by the United Kingdom by the Immigration Office. The act is about discrimination on national and ethnic grounds. This is the national government. Maybe I can quote it more precisely, because the ERRC tried to bring the document to court. There are six groups who are singled out, and they are not allowed—they can be stopped from entering that country. Roma are among those groups. It does not matter what passport they have. They can be prevented from entering the territory of the United Kingdom.

There were a number of changes to immigration laws and laws on asylum-seeking in Finland and in other countries—countries that are the most advanced, by the way, in their policies toward their own Romani citizens. In response specifically to the fact that groups of Roma from Eastern Europe are Travelers and ask asylum in their respective countries, they changed the laws—making other asylum seekers a little bit angry, and sending a bad message at home, that because of Roma, for instance, visa requirements were reintroduced for Slovak passport holders or other passports. I do not like to be a bad prophet, but the same thing may happen now for Romanian passport holders with some EU countries, reintroducing visa requirements on it in order to limit the travel of some groups of people, including Roma. We tried to raise the discussion to find political solutions to that, not administrative consular solutions which try to encourage the fortress Europe. I think that if we want in the OSCE to keep a high level, a high standard of human rights, we have to react to these developments in countries which are, in Europe, the symbols of democracy. They are reintroducing now limitations on the freedom of movement. I say this because we see our personal history, knowing how much the people in Eastern Europe wanted to benefit from the freedom of movement, now we may have restrictions which are coming from the other part of Europe because, among others, the Roma migration. This has generated back, at home, a backlash and increasing hostility against the Roma, which generates the spiral which was mentioned in the High Commissioner's report, which is going down and down, which feeds the passions of ethnic hate, of intolerance, which pushes people to separate from each other, and which is breeding the elements of tension and of destructive violence. So we have to think about this issue in a larger political context and bring into discussion the Roma-related policies of both the consolidated democracies and of the newly-established democracies.

Thank you very much.

Mr. SMITH. Mr. Gheorghe, thank you. Before yielding to Mr. Pitts, I want to note that 2 years ago we had Monica Horakova, one of the parliamentarians of Roma ethnicity, testify before our Commission. She did a wonderful job, and hopefully that is a trend. It seems to me that the only way to lock in the gains, and to institutionalize the rights and protections for the Roma is to become more politicized, to have blocs, to let politicians know that there is a reward potentially for at least being attentive to the Roma issues. It seems to me that the more that Roma

are mainstreamed, and I am so glad that you are doing this with the OSCE, that will make these gains more sustainable going forward. I congratulate you on that. Mr. Pitts?

Mr. PITTS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, Mr. Gheorghe for your testimony. You mentioned that you have a sense of worry and anxiety that on the ground things are deteriorating. You mentioned social exclusion and eviction. You mentioned putting Roma in “social houses,” living in segregated areas. Could you describe a little bit what you mean by “social houses” and in what countries is this being practiced?

Mr. GHEORGHE. Well, it is practiced, as far as I know, in Central European countries. I mention here Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Czech Republic. The situation is that the whole style of life which was generated during the Communists with respect to Roma, who were at the time identified as proletarian—they were put into blocks of flats around industrial complexes or in the new cities of the Communists—now they can no longer afford that kind of housing now because they lost their jobs and the corresponding assets. In Bulgaria, for instance, it is happening in the distribution of the electricity. It is very much still communistic, because you have a central system to distribute electricity and determine the use by individual households. You cannot count individual consumption, and to individualize, for instance, the consumption in the bills. If the whole neighborhood has to pay the bills, they may say, “Well, but we have some Roma here who are not paying their bills, so we have to pay for them.” So one way to solve the problem is to get rid of them, to evict them from their respective houses and to put them in other part of the city, in cheaper houses eventually with cheaper bills, but to be by themselves there, separate from “us” who like to keep the track of the debts: electricity, gas, water, housing improvements and so on. So it is happening almost everywhere in different degrees.

Mr. PITTS. It is happening in France?

Mr. GHEORGHE. In France, it is happening in a different way, because there is a law which allows people who like to be Travelers to have a license as a Traveler. It is connected with commercial activities. Municipalities with a certain number of people are obliged by law to organize camping sites for them. If the mayor is not doing so, then the prefect, the district, can intervene and organize the camping site. What is happening is that the mayor and the local population refuse to have such camping sites on their territory. Currently, there is a growing discussion and hostility of the mayors toward this category of people. What complicates it is, I think, the Roma from Eastern Europe, taking the way of itinerants, or migrant workers, essentially living in caravans, they like normally to be on such camping sites. The citizens of the municipality say, “Why do we have to pay for these guys who are coming from Eastern Europe? They are not our people. They are illegal in France.”

So there is a very confusing situation. In France, the main item in the electoral campaign is insecurity and small deviancy. The two things are connected, and there is an increased perception now of the *Gens du Voyage*, the Gypsies, as being among the sources of insecurity in France. So hostility is connected to that. But coming back to the question that you mentioned so these kind of “social houses” which are organized are sometimes low quality. They are organized in what were previously barns for animals, and were converted into housing in some cities in Romania. In Lunk IX in Slovakia, the municipality of Kosice was one of the first cities which experienced this program. The mayor at that time

is now the president of Slovakia, he tried to collect people who are “socially unacceptable” and to put them together, which generated a community that now almost exclusively is Roma. So the others who are there, the whites who are there, they prefer to leave, and the Roma remain there. There is a similar situation in France, again in Herbley, which is next to Paris, 10 percent of the population are now *Tigan, Gens du Voyage*. The French people are withdrawing their children from the school, and they are sending the children to other schools, because there are too many “Gypsy children” in there, so patterns are repeating in different countries depending on the context. What made me worry was that in Eastern Europe, we speak about hundreds of thousands of people. We speak about one of the fastest growing populations in that part of Europe, a population which can make up to 5 to 10 percent of a total population or even 20 percent or more in regions like Eastern Slovakia or there are villages, settlements, that are 100 percent Roma who are living in these kind of segregated communities with very bad infrastructure, with poor education, with no medical facilities. There are really things which for Europe are intolerable, and these will be soon members of European Union. What contributes more, thinking again of what is in Article 40 of the OSCE Copenhagen Document, the hate, the intolerance, is that in Slovakia, for instance, the European Commission, the PHARE¹ program, made available a program of 10 million euros to improve the infrastructure of such settlements. But the mayors refused to take the money, because you have to apply, and to have some kind of projects for them. So they refused to take the money because this year is an election year. They do not want to seem to voters that they would like to improve the conditions of Gypsies on their territory, and that more people maybe will come to these kind of improved settlements. A complication stemming from communism is that most people were settled, they were forcibly “civilized,” they were settled on land whose ownership was not clear then. There was communism; you know that the land was “everyone’s.”

Now the land is vindicated, and there are thousands of Roma people throughout Central and Eastern Europe, as I mentioned, living on illegal settlements because the land is not authorized or is disputed. You cannot move anything there. You cannot bring order. You cannot organize a school because it is illegal. So you need reform at the level of the state to decide the legal status of that land and for the ownership rights of the land. And it is a huge operation. Again, if we do not collect enough political weight and enough political pressure, these issues will not be solved by themselves.

You, as contemporaries of the Helsinki Act, you distinguished Congressmen, know how to operate with political influence when you want to make a change.

I think that if we want to make a change in the situation of Europe, of Roma in Europe, we need as much political pressure as possible and an institutional means to bring dramatic change, not the incremental steps, which are taken now. They are too small. They are too superficial. The issues are too deeply rooted in order to be dealt with superficially. We need real political reform in order to tackle the issues, as I mentioned, land rights, illegal settlements—they are giving IDs to people

¹ The full name is “Phare—Community programme for assistance for economic restructuring in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.”

who are stateless, de facto, because of lack of papers. These awful, segregated conditions in schooling, in housing, in health, and in all what makes a decent life for people.

Mr. PITTS. Thank you. I want you to elaborate on something you mentioned in your testimony, and that is, religious freedom. You said, I think, that Roma generally belonged to the faith of the majority community in which they live, but they are beginning to experience persecution now. Is this because they are Roma or is this because of their religious faith? Can you elaborate on the issue of religious freedom?

Mr. GHEORGHE. It's a combination. I mean, religious Roma belong to different denominations. They are both Muslims and Christians and Christian Orthodox and Catholics, and then belonging to different denominations. One interesting phenomena which appears over decades—I would say the last decade, and is more intense now in Eastern Europe, is the evangelization of Roma, so there are more and more Evangelical churches with strong appeal to people who otherwise are marginalized not only the communities, they are marginalized in the churches.

There, where dominant churches are Orthodox and Catholic, the Roma usually are ignored. The Orthodox countries have a tradition where the church is allied with the state, especially in the revival of the nation state. I mean, some churches are the backbone of the newly invented ethnic nation of state.

In Greece, for instance, they have asked to put "Orthodox" on the passport to make the religious affiliation part of the citizen identity.

To a lesser degree, this identification might be in Romania, in Bulgaria, in Russia, in the Orthodox countries, where, again, the church has a history of cooperation with the state.

So now, Roma who are joining these Evangelical churches, be they Baptist, Adventist, Pentecostal especially, they are now looked at with hostility, first, because they are defecting from the official church and because as Gypsies, the Roma, they provide a medium for what is called proselytizing by "foreign" churches. In Romania they became a little bit more relaxed, although here and there are situations of internals, but in Serbia now the situation is much more acute. Over the last month we have reports about these religious gatherings, the assemblies being harassed and even attacked.

Mr. PITTS. Where?

Mr. GHEORGHE. In Serbia, in Novi Sad and in Leskovac. There is one of the strongest Romani Pentecostal communities in the region.

There is a regional organization based in France called *Vie et Lumiere* (Life and Light), which says that, by now, there are about 1 million Roma in that congregation throughout the world from United States to now Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

They are quite effective in reaching communities at the grassroot and doing much work that I personally am not able to do. I have to say that I look with interest, and sometimes with some kind of jealousy at their work, because they are working with the real people more than I am working with the people—I'm working as a bureaucrat, with papers.

The above-mentioned organizations have broad information about some kind of harassment in the central Asian republic, where the Roma, who traditionally are Orthodox, because they are coming from Russia, they now started to be part of these Evangelical churches.

I would propose and it would be helpful to encourage a discussion about Roma and freedom of religion as part of the ODIHR panel on freedom of religion to address this issue in itself taking account of respect for the freedom of religion and also to take advantage, as I am an activist, petition a little bit, regarding this development, which can bring the world of the recommendations and resolutions closer to the world of the real people.

Mr. PITTS. Thank you very much.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you very much, Mr. Pitts.

Mr. Gheorghe, thank you so much for your testimony, unless you have anything else to add.

Mr. GHEORGHE. Thank you very much.

Mr. SMITH. I appreciate it. Your full comments will be made a part of the record.

I'd like to ask our next two witnesses if they would come to the witness table. Beginning with Dimitrina Petrova, who is the Executive Director of the European Roma Rights Center, which is an international nonprofit human rights organization based in Budapest, Hungary. Previously, from 1992 to 1996, she was chair of the human rights project in Sofia, Bulgaria. This organization monitors the human rights situation of Roma in Bulgaria and undertakes legal defense in cases of human rights abuse.

In the spring of 1995, she was Chairholder and had courses on the human rights and ethnic relations in Eastern Europe at the University of Oregon. In 1995 to 1996, she was regional coordinator of southeastern Europe, and in 1994 field officer at the international secretariat of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights in Vienna, Austria. Between 1980 to 1995, Ms. Petrova was teaching at the St. Kliment Okhridiski University of Sofia, where she lectured in philosophy and philosophy of law.

From 1990 to 1991, she was a member of the Bulgarian Parliament, where she participated in the drafting of the 1991 Bulgarian Constitution. She has worked on various fields of human rights movements, such as training of human rights experts, conducting fact-finding missions on human rights abuses, organizing conferences, participating in a number of conferences on human rights and related fields. She was awarded the Human Rights Award in 1994 from the American Bar Association.

Our second witness will be Rumyan Russinov, who is the Executive Director of the Open Society Institute, Roma Participation Program, the RPP, based in Budapest, Hungary. Under his leadership in 2000 the RPP initiated and supported Romani, NGO-led desegregation initiatives, first held in Vidin, Bulgaria, and later in other cities in Bulgaria, as well as Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. Mr. Russinov has a human rights background; between 1993 and 2000, he directed the monitoring and advocacy program of the human rights' project, a leading Roma rights and advocacy organization based in Sofia, Bulgaria.

In 1997 to 1998, RPP started the national campaign for equal participation of Roma in the public life of Bulgaria. Mr. Russinov led a coalition of Romani organizations which negotiated with the Government of Bulgaria the adoption of the "framework program for Equal Integration of Roma in Bulgarian Society," a Roma-supported comprehensive policy document for the development of the Romani community in Bulgaria.

Mr. Russinov holds an M.A. degree in economics. In 1996, he interned at ODIHR in Warsaw, Poland. He is a member of the board of directors for the European Roma Rights Center, an international public interest law organization, which monitors the human rights situation of Roma and provides legal defense in cases of human rights abuse. He was a member of the steering committee of the Roma delegation to the World Conference Against Racism in South Africa in 2001. He has published many articles on Roma rights and public policy in Bulgarian and international human rights editions. If you would begin, Ms. Petrova?

**DIMITRINA PETROVA,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, EUROPEAN ROMA RIGHTS CENTER**

Ms. PETROVA. Thank you.

Mr. Chairperson, ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of the European Roma Rights Center, I wish to thank the Helsinki Commission for this unique opportunity to testify here.

The European Roma Rights Center believes that the unique history of the United States in addressing legacies of racism and ordering and implementing school desegregation has much to offer Europe today. This is especially true as more and more Romani activists take up models of U.S. civil rights action and fight for justice and equality, including equal access to education.

For the Romani children in Europe today, equal educational opportunity is a mirage. Despite the numerous international instruments, the constitutional guarantees in each country in Europe and the domestic laws which set racial discrimination beyond the pale of permissible action in all spheres of life, discrimination against Roma in education is pervasive in Europe. My organization has growing concerns about the situation of the Roma people in Western Europe, but here I would like to highlight especially the educational problems of Roma in Central and Eastern Europe, where the majority of the Roma live and where there is a rapid deterioration, indeed disintegration of the Roma from the mainstream society following the abortive Communist attempt to integrate the Roma, which in fact amounted to attempts to assimilate the Roma. I have brought here a written statement of reasonable size. I was requested to bring something of reasonable size. However, we could put and bring to your attention a much longer statement of an indeed unreasonable size because the issue of discrimination against Roma in the educational systems of Central and Eastern Europe is tremendous. I am outlining below several patterns of harm suffered by the Romani children in the educational systems in Central and Eastern Europe, and I am trying to group them into the following. One, segregation in schools and classes for the mentally handicapped, which was already referred to. Two, segregation inside the mainstream schools. That is, Romani children are put in separate classes or in separate, rundown buildings, even though the school itself is a standard school, a normal school. Three, school segregation based on residential segregation. These are the ghetto schools. Four, various forms of exclusion of the Roma from the school system. Five, various forms of racial abuse in schools, including physical abuse. As to the first pattern, this is the most pernicious one. It is typical today of the Czech Republic, where, as it was already said, 75 percent of the Roma attends special schools, and this is governmental acknowledgment of that fact. As it was pointed out, 50 percent of all the children who go to the special schools for the mentally

handicapped are Roma nationwide. Despite repeated pronouncements by the Czech authorities that a thorough reform of the school system is being planned, to date the special school system remains intact. Similar is the situation in Hungary and also in Slovakia.

The trap of the special schools for Romani children causes a triple damage to these children: the damage of racial segregation itself, the substandard education that they receive, and the stigma, the lifelong stigma of mental retardation. As to the second pattern, segregation in the mainstream schools, these are usually Roma-only catch-up classes, sometimes in separate, lower-standard buildings. Children there are taught according to adjusted curriculums, not providing education on an equal footing with the other students. In these catch-up classes children almost never catch up. In Croatia, most Romani children, for example, in the primary schools are relegated to separate classes. In Hungary, estimates indicate that Roma make up 84.2 percent of the students in catch-up classes in 192 schools that were surveyed in a recent research. Many of them, like, for example, in the town of Hajduhadhaz, which became recently notorious for the police brutality against Roma in that town, the Roma go to a separate building, which is of much worse quality than the building to which the Hungarian children go. Another problem is that the Romani children in these so-called catch-up classes are never returned, almost never returned to the normal school system, and very much the same problem we have documented in Slovenia. As to the third pattern, just to put it briefly, ghetto children go to ghetto schools. These are formally standard schools and formally standard curriculums, but education is, in effect, substandard in them because teachers have lower qualifications, because of neglect, because teaching aids are lacking, because there is no motivation and so on. As to the various forms of exclusion, due to lack of personal documents, for example, children in Romania, Romani children in Romania, but also in countries like Greece and Italy, which I pledged to leave out, but my conscience really does not allow me to leave out a country like Greece or Italy where the situation in many respects is as bad as in Central and Eastern Europe, children are not enrolled in schools at all, and there are various other forms of exclusion, such as the arrangement called the private students arrangement in Hungary. This arrangement is introduced to accommodate the highly talented children to not go regularly to school, but to, in fact, move faster through the school by just appearing for examinations, for exams. But our research in Hungary shows, and the research of many other organizations, that almost all children in this private student arrangement are, in fact, Roma, and that it is the discretion of the teachers and the headmasters to put them under this arrangement and thus, in fact, to exclude them from the school. I will not deal at any length, because of my time limits, with the various forms of racial abuse, the many cases of violence on behalf of teachers that we have documented. Teachers in Croatia we have witnessed—we have been present at physical punishment when teachers are telling us these children are different and without disciplining them by beating them they will never be made to behave, they have behavioral problems and so on. We have this attitude widespread.

There is abuse on behalf of non-Romani children. We have a number of parents who have told us, "My child sits in the back of the class alone and the teacher never includes them in the class." So these forms of abuse are widespread for those fewer children, Romani children who

manage to be enrolled in the mainstream schools. It is the position of the European Roma Rights Center that the problem of the systemic denial to Roma of the right to education cannot be overcome without the implementation of comprehensive social — school desegregation programs. We recognize that desegregation is not a universal panacea able to remedy all problems that Roma encounter in the school system, but it is our contention that without school desegregation real change will be elusive.

School desegregation is therefore the framework within which we approach and should approach the complex problems faced by the Roma in the field of education.

However, school desegregation cannot be pursued by civil society projects and donor interventions alone. It can be resolved. It can be pursued only via state action and with the sustained and engaged political will of governments.

At present, however, real political will for school desegregation in Europe, in Central and Eastern Europe in particular, is lacking. Although in a few instances governments in Central and Eastern Europe have recently included the concept of desegregation in official programs, where such programs exist they remain largely unelaborated and fully unimplemented.

International involvement is crucial to assure the real development and implementation in full of school desegregation programs.

The European Roma Rights Center has submitted a set of recommendations to the European governments and a separate set of recommendations, they are very few but I think important, in respect to the U.S. Government. The United States' experience with school desegregation is unparalleled, and U.S. desegregation expertise is needed now in Europe.

The European Roma Rights Center requests that the United States Government provide support for the development and realization of workable plans for the integrated education of Roma in Europe, in particular ensure U.S. Congressional and States Department involvement at the highest level with the governments of Europe in their efforts to develop and implement comprehensive and effective school desegregation policies in countries where Roma live. Further, ensure financial, technical and expert assistance, included, but not limited to the following.

Providing U.S. expert assistance to European ministries of finance and education to analyze the relative costs and benefits of maintaining the existing segregated schools systems as opposed to the costs of school desegregation in order to promote recognition of the high costs of maintaining this segregated education system and continuing the reproduction of a permanent underclass. Encouraging the USAID, the World Bank and other agencies to make support for comprehensive desegregation programs a top priority in countries where Roma live. Promoting, in Europe, U.S. models of curriculum reform as one possible method of ending the exclusion of groups such as Roma, as well as furthering the development of open democratic societies. Further, developing abroad U.S. Government programs such as Head Start in order to close the preschool disparities between Romani and non-Romani children. Finally, sending U.S. trainers to work with European governments and other experts to develop and implement action plans for school desegregation. Thank you.

Mr. SMITH. Thanks very much, Ms. Petrova. Mr. Russinov?

**RUMYAN RUSSINOV,
DIRECTOR, ROMA PARTICIPATION PROJECT**

Mr. RUSSINOV. Chairman Smith, members of the Commission, thank you very much for inviting me again to testify before you. Today I will speak about school desegregation in Central and Eastern Europe. This is the first major issue around which Romani activists from my country, Bulgaria, and from the other countries in the region have coalesced. In the past decade, Central and Eastern Europe has undergone significant efforts toward democratic reform. Alongside this process, however, we have witnessed a reverse tendency affecting the Roma, who number some 10 million in the region. The Roma alone became even more isolated, even more segregated, even more excluded from opportunities and prospects enjoyed by the other members of our societies.

Ms. Dimitrina Petrova just presented a comprehensive analysis of the situation with the school segregation in Central and Eastern Europe. I would like to focus on Romani actions to challenge school segregation and what is needed to ensure the sustainability of the process.

The first initiative to challenge school segregation was made in 2000 in the city of Vidin, as it was mentioned in the beginning. This is a Bulgarian city and the action was made by Roma. The Open Society Institute's Roma Participation Program, which I direct, supported a local Romani organization to initiate the desegregation of the local all-Romani school.

Some 400 Romani children from the all-Romani school were bused to the seven mainstream schools in the city of Vidin. Adult Roma monitors were placed in the receiving school to address any problems which might arise. Pupils were given extracurricular lessons and structured homework sessions, and the very poorest children received a daily lunch bag to take to schools. This effort was reported in the *New York Times* on June 14 by John Tagliabue.

There were several general questions before this initiative which we wanted to answer. Will Roma accept the process or not? Will non-Roma accept this transition or not? Will the school authority, the school environment, accept this transition or not? Will the Romani children function successfully in the new competitive environment or not? I can say that after the first year we answered positively to all these questions. We showed that this transition is possible. Of course, we had a lot of problems there, but we showed that this is really possible, and we passed a lot of theoretical discussions on this issue.

The successful integration today of some 600 Romani children in the maintained Vidin schools continues in the current school year. The Vidin initiative provided a viable model upon which to build a strategy for national school desegregation in Bulgaria and to thereby ensure equal access to quality education for Romani children. In 2001, Romani NGOs in five cities in Bulgaria have made impressive efforts to initiate school desegregation by introducing the Vidin model. With the support of the Roman Participation Program, efforts to ensure equal education opportunities for Romani children have also started in Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

The initial steps in these countries involve preparatory preschool activities for Romani children in order to prepare them to pass the tests for mainstream school entrants. Several recent international fora highlighted the growing consensus among Romani activists and Romani parents for the school desegregation.

The World Conference Against Racism, which was mentioned before, the Romani delegates there called for desegregation and put the issue in the final conference document. The OSCE conference in Bucharest September 2001 also highlighted the issue.

At the domestic level, however, our efforts to translate the Roma political will for desegregation have been successful only partially so far. Although many governments adopted policies and programs for Roma dealing with the issue of education, all these programs remain largely unimplemented. Nowhere in Central and Eastern Europe have governments undertaken concrete measures to eradicate school segregation.

The nationwide desegregation of schools cannot be carried out by grassroots initiatives or NGOs only. It will take comprehensive strategies, mechanisms and resources which can be only provided by the government. The sustainability of the desegregation initiatives we have undertaken depends on the full involvement of the government.

In the end, with the recommendations, we need the support of your Commission and of the U.S. Congress and the U.S. Government, government agencies, such as USAID, to fight this fundamental inequality. We ask you for immediate political, financial and technical support to help us achieve equal educational opportunities.

Your American experience with school desegregation is the model we are trying to learn from. We need American civil rights leaders to come to our countries and address the issue with the highest level of government and with the public.

We need the World Bank and the U.S. Government to show these countries the exorbitant costs of running parallel school systems and to find ways, through loans and grants, to help our governments finance systemic school desegregation. We need the World Food Programme's school lunch program to provide lunches to Roma children whose families are too poor to do so themselves.

We need the presence of groups like International Republican Institute and National Democratic Institute in the region to help build Roma political capacity in the national elections. We need also the direct support of the U.S. Congress, and we ask you to keep the pressure on your counterparts in our national parliaments, in the European Parliament, and on your own American ambassadors to support school desegregation for Roma people. This country has gone through the nightmare of racial segregation. The political leaders and the people of United States know better than anyone else the human and the social costs of school segregation, and this makes me believe that our Romani calls for equal educational opportunities will find school allies here.

Chairman Smith, thank you very much for your continuing support.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you both for your excellent testimony and for the great work you do. Mr. Russinov, let me ask you about the Vidin experience. You have pointed out in your testimony that there are some five other cities in Bulgaria that have made impressive efforts. How many remain to be done? Are these large efforts? Are these small or large cities? Do local, regional and national authorities play different roles in Bulgaria? In other words, who is it that really makes the difference in a given city? In Vidin, for example, who were those who really made the difference, what part of the government?

Mr. RUSSINOV. I can say that in the year 2000 the Romani NGO called DROM had really great problems in the beginning. First, they started with convincing the Romani parents why this process is neces-

sary. They were against the wall of 50 years of inertia and prejudices. For 50 years the Romani parents didn't think about where to send their children, in which school send their children. Because the school was in the Romani ghetto, they didn't have any other choice. The choice was not informed mainly, I can say.

So they spent—I mean the DROM, the Romani NGO—spent a lot of time to convince the parents and to express them, to show them the benefits attending normal schools, attending mainstream schools. After that, this Romani NGO started to convince the local educational authorities for this transition. It was also a very difficult process. It was the first breakthrough. They also convinced, I can say, or prepared, the majority society with a big media campaign.

I can say that there were several other efforts in other cities which were not successful. For example, in the city of Yambol, when some Romani children went to the mainstream schools, there were demonstrations against this on the part of the majority parents, because actually the situation was not prepared.

That is why I'm saying that it is really important this process to be well prepared, both sides, I mean majority and Roma to be prepared for this transition. We show actually that this is possible with a concrete example when all of the parties of the process are prepared. I mean, the Romani parents, the majority parents, the media, the society, the local authorities.

I can say honestly that in the beginning they were not supportive for this process, but now there is agreement, special agreement between local authorities and Roma organization in order to deal with desegregation. I hope this model is really viable and can be realized at national level.

Mr. SMITH. Let me ask you: earlier Mr. Gheorghe mentioned the dropout issue. Will the training of parents, for example, help, or at least bring the parents further into the process, help mitigate that problem, or is that attributable to lack of safety and perhaps the lack of hope going forward? For example, what are the reasons for that high dropout rate, and how can that be turned around?

Mr. RUSSINOV. As I mentioned, this is 50 years of inertia. For 50 years the biggest percentage of Romani children attended the so-called Romani schools, or special schools, in the other countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Roma were really isolated from mainstream education, and unfortunately this became a norm, even for Roma. That is why they have to attend schools; they do not need to attend schools because they cannot achieve too much. That is why it is really important that the Roma community and the Romani parents have to be prepared for this process. We showed that this is possible when they are prepared.

I know that some NGOs, some experts, actually claim that the education is not part of the values for Roma. It is not true. I think this is a racist statement. When we explain to these people what the benefits are, and when we show with concrete examples that this is possible, I think we can overcome this huge barrier.

Mr. SMITH. Ms. Petrova, in your written testimony, you mentioned the Hungarian Ombudsman for National Minorities has effectively acknowledged that there is some school segregation in his country, and obviously acknowledgment is often a start. But has there been any concrete action taken as a result of that? You mentioned earlier, in your

oral presentation, the unimplemented aspects of so many agreements. All too often people come to agreement but then nothing happens. What about Hungary?

Ms. PETROVA. Yes, the Hungarian Government acknowledges the problem. The Hungarian Government, as of a couple of days ago after consultation with a number of NGOs, adopted a long-term strategy in January of this year, and in that long-term strategy, the government formulates as one of the tasks before the government school desegregation. So we have in Hungary acknowledgement of the problem and we have, at least at this level of most general slogan-like formulation, desegregation as a task.

As to action, my answer is no. There are projects in the direction of improving Roma schooling. For example, there is investing in these catch-up classes.

And in fact there is a budgetary, financial incentive for many teachers and school directors to have these catch-up classes because they receive additional funding from the state for this. I am afraid they are interested in having these catch-up classes remain in place for that reason.

There are also financial incentives for teachers who have more Roma children. There are a number of projects, which are very partial and do not focus in what we believe is the right direction in school desegregation.

How sincere the slogan for school desegregation is on behalf of the Hungarian political class remains to be seen.

Mr. SMITH. In your testimony, you rightly point out that the Roma are Europe's most persecuted ethnic group. You make a number of specific recommendations to the European governments and to the U.S. Government. The first recommendation to the European governments is to cease immediately the practice of placing Romani children in special schools. What kind of hearing is that getting in Europe? Are they doing it?

Ten years from now, do you see that problem as largely resolved or it will just have been a holding action over the next 10 years?

Ms. PETROVA. Last fall, another generation of Romani children, no less in proportion than in the previous years, were adopted, were enrolled in the special schools. The same will happen next fall. I do not know how many years will it take.

There are attempts, we are told all the time by the Czech Republic Government, to reform the entire education system. And in some settings, phasing out these special schools for the Romani children is on the agenda. At least this has been stated for at least 3 years.

There is litigation going on. The European Roma Rights Center and local counsel have, after exhausting the domestic venues in the Czech Republic, filed a case against the Czech Republic Government in the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. The case is now pending. We challenge the practice of streaming Romani children to the special schools.

We were unsuccessful in the Czech Constitutional Court on this issue. While the court said that our evidence is overwhelming and entirely credible, the court did not feel that it has the mandate to act as a policy-maker. This is one crucial difference, as you know, between the civil law and judges in courts play in implementing social reform in Europe and in the United States.

So the issue is pending in the courts. But in the meantime, we are still expecting the Czech Republic Government to act. But I have to say in the Czech Republic, there is at least acknowledgment of the problem. Acknowledgment is less in place in Slovakia. It is almost not at all in place in Hungary.

Hungary—the Hungarian authorities deny the high number of Roma going to the special schools. They provide a figure which contradicts our and other experts' estimates.

According to the Hungarian Government, only about 5,000 Romani children go to special schools. We believe that this estimate is based on the very restrictive definition of what constitutes special schools. But in reality, the majority of Romani children, in fact, go to schools or classes that are substandard. Most of them are substandard normatively. They are adaptive curricula. Many of them are substandard in practice, not in theory. They should be the same, but they are not because of other reasons, including racial prejudice.

As to other countries, apart from the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, the problem exists, but it remains largely unestimated. In Bulgaria, for example, the majority—about 19,000 children—that go to special schools, are Roma.

Similar is the situation in figures in Romania and other countries. When it comes to special schools, our concern lies especially with the Republic of Slovakia and Hungary because the predominant pattern of segregation there are the special schools.

There is here an enormous potential for misunderstanding when we talk to U.S. experts because the definition of mental handicap, in Eastern Europe, differs from that in the United States.

When we say that children go to special schools, I have said this to many Americans—who then think that I am talking about medium, deep or profound handicap. What is not immediately obvious is that the special schools in the region, in fact, are for children with alleged but, we believe, non-existent mental handicaps.

As to the children who are diagnosed as having a medium, deep or profound handicap, the psychiatric doctors in our region assess that these children are not educable, and these children are not sent to school at all. They are sent to support institutions, where they are only taught life skills. But they are not taught—they are not provided with education at all.

I'm not aware of the numbers of this, but the way the children are dealt with is this. And it differs from the way children with mental handicaps are treated in the United States and in Western European.

So this is the potential for misunderstanding, because when we are talking about special schools, there is a danger that people from other cultures might think that we are talking about real mental handicaps—medium or profound—while we believe there is not even a slight handicap. Our research shows that we simply have absolutely normal, intelligent, joyful, energetic, dynamic children. This is what I personally have seen. This is what many of my colleagues have seen. The only reason they are in these schools, contrary to what part of the Czech expert educationalists indicate, the only reason is that they are Roma.

Routinely, when the Romani child is five, the family is called before a pedagogical expert and is told, "So, your child will go to the school in our neighborhood. Do you agree?" In most of the cases, the parents simply agree—this is uninformed consent. This is one basis on which we have

challenged the practice, because parents are generally not provided with information, and not made to understand that these schools are dead-end schools and that after seventh grade, children have no further prospects.

Mr. SMITH. It is also my understanding that any number of authorities can make their recommendations. Even the testing is culturally biased, so you are more apt to get a negative outcome that gives a paper trail, suggesting that the child should be placed in a special school, even though it is not true. Isn't that correct?

Ms. PETROVA. Yes, this is another thing that we have discovered. Here we not only see that the tests themselves are racially biased, and rely on—and do not take into account—cultural difference. They are applied so the test in itself is racially biased. But it is also applied in a racially biased way.

We have gathered information about this. This information is before the Czech court and now before the court of Strasbourg.

What we need, especially from the United States, is more expertise in assessment, in evaluation of children, assessment and evaluation of the practices of placement because this is a very controversial issue, why children are placed in these schools, on what criteria.

We need expertise in this because the local expertise seems to be plagued with racism.

Mr. SMITH. Let me make two final comments and then yield to my good friend and colleague.

The fact that the courts do not have the same kind of ability to compel certain outcomes in Europe—for instance, even if the Strasbourg court rules in your favor and in favor of the Romani—it seems that the decision is more like a “sense of the court,” as there is no real implementation or mechanism available to enforce it.

In this country, as you know, we have strict scrutiny for the treatment of African Americans, which has led to many laws, which even appear to be biased, being overruled or ruled unconstitutional. Certainly the legal process has served the purpose of enlightening a lot of people, and laws are then created that are much more responsive to racism.

Underscoring again the need for more political empowerment on the part of Romani, it seems to me when they become a viable voting block of informed electorate, the politicians—acting in their own self interest—will be more likely to hear and respond affirmatively to their needs.

So what we can do, especially the U.S. Government, with our different institutes such as the IRI and the others, it seems to me, would be helpful is that we direct more emphasis on this objective. I think that's something we need to pursue even more so that they become a viable bloc.

The other question—how responsive has the U.S. Government been to Romani political development? As you said, they are the most disenfranchised, the most persecuted bloc. You made a number of specific recommendations like instructing USAID and the World Bank to make support for a comprehensive desegregation program a top priority.

Have we? Is USAID doing that? Is the World Bank doing that? You have listed five recommendations, and it is not meant to be considered as the total. You said, “These, among others.” Is the U.S. Government being responsive?

Ms. PETROVA. In my opinion, the answer is unfortunately, no, so far. In the early 1990s, we very much relied on U.S. assistance, support, in the overall process of democratization and the U.S. assistance was crucial for processes such as making it possible for a human rights community, for example, to emerge. But I have to say that it has been U.S. private donors who have shown a consistent interest in helping, especially with such tough issues as the Roma, and also some sensitive human rights issues. But especially in the case of the Roma, in my view, the U.S. Government, especially through the USAID, has not done sufficiently, and has not shown determination, competence, and interest even in what seems to be one of the most pressing issues in the region.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you.

Mr. Pitts?

Mr. PITTS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Petrova, a couple of questions. Some writers have suggested that the Communist regimes were, in the area of education, relatively better than current ones in that they required Roma to go to school, and therefore achieved higher levels of education among Roma.

Would you comment on that theory? Clearly, the discrimination against Roma as far as education is concerned, is not just a phenomena of post-Communist countries. Have Western European countries, not struggling with the transition from communism, been any more successful in addressing these issues?

Ms. PETROVA. To the first question, Communist society, all its defects notwithstanding, did provide more space for equal educational opportunity, including to ethnic minorities.

The biggest defect, however, of these Communist regimes, when it comes to education of the minorities, was that this education was assimilative. It was not allowing the minorities to have their ethnic identity and draw upon it. So from the point of view of upholding the rights of members belonging to ethnic minorities, the Communist governments were violating what we see now as international minority rights, human rights standards.

Nevertheless, the true part of this theory, I think, is that overall educational opportunity, first it was guaranteed—Roma children did go to school in the overwhelming majority of cases. Not going to school must have been a real exception. Compare this to a country like Greece, where for generations, there are Roma of all ages right now who have never been in school for one day. This tells us a lot about the relative success of the Communist regime.

But there is also one myth about the Communist society. I believe—I do not know if this is the right place for theories of this sort—but I personally and many of my colleagues do believe that the Communist society was a class society. It was not classless. It was not a society of equality. It had its dominant class. It has its outcasts as well and its lowest classes.

The Roma, in the Communist society, were parts of the working class, the proletariat. They were proletarianized. They were forced to, in effect, part with their traditional way of life. They were settled down. They were forced to settle down. There was a forced sedentarization of the previously nomadic Roma. They were forced to go to school and they were forced also into the work force.

So the Roma lost their way of life. But they never became equal in the Communist society. They remained at the bottom of society. They emerged from communism, being the lowest strata of the working class. That's why before them the falling apart of everything that had—of the relative achievement under communism was fast and dramatic.

After the comparison with Western Europe, in my view, a parallel between the situation of Roma in most of Western countries and Eastern countries is extremely unhelpful because the lack of Communist—of communism in Western countries kept in place the traditional way of life, the nomadic way of life of the Roma. So there was no proletarianization in the Roma in Western Europe. They remained nomadic, and therefore, their educational needs in most—in many countries, not all of them, but in many countries, such as England for example, the Netherlands, or in France, or northern Italy, the Roma community has had a different way of life from the post-Communist countries for decades. Therefore, they have different educational needs, and different needs for example for equal access to labor.

So to me, the parallel would be difficult, but even with this said, there are enormous problems with the rights of the Roma in the West European countries as well, mostly, now in the post-September 11 context of migration and access to asylum procedures. But also problems with, for example, forced housing segregation of the Roma where mostly not local, mostly of immigrant origins in Italy.

Mr. PITTS. Thank you. Mr. Russinov, as a follow-up, for many minorities in Europe, the right to education in their mother tongue is one of the principle demands. Could you cite your experience in Bulgaria or other countries as far as the issue of education in the Romani language.

Do you think that interest in education in the Romani language is increasing, or decreasing? Is there support among Roma for schools that either because of a focus on Romani culture, history, language, would be effective just for Roma like Hungarian language schools, in some countries, where Hungarians are a minority? Would you elaborate on that?

Mr. RUSSINOV. This is very deep. This topic is very deep discussion. I can say that in the former program, what we call integration of Roma, which was mentioned, in the beginning we asked for including in the mainstream curricula, Romani language in school, Romani history and Romani culture. This is part of our demands to the Bulgarian Government.

And it was adopted in 1999 by the government. Unfortunately, as I mentioned, it remained unimplemented. We have to divide—how to say? We have to divide the two issues, the issue of equal access to education is one. Another issue is preserving of Romani culture, Romani history and Romani language.

Yes, of course, we do not want to be assimilated. We want to keep and preserve and to develop our culture, our language and to know our history. Not only Romani children to know their history and their culture, but also the majority of children, they have to know also these things.

That's why we still demand from our government, to include this in the governmental curriculum programs. The reason—I can say that there is now discussion—is it to try to assimilation if Romani children are fully integrated into the mainstream school environment, is there assimilation?

My answer is negative. I do not think there is assimilation. Because the results until now, up until now, the small number of Roma who are,

I can say, well integrated, and well educated, they are not assimilated. They have their Roma identity. They have their own culture. They know their history. I do not think we have to oppose the first issue to the second.

We can combine the two issues. I think that these, the Roma culture, history and language can be part of the regular curricula in the schools. I also wanted to mention that we cannot construct, we cannot have our Romani elite if we have this large number of uneducated, or poorly educated, Roma.

I can say that in the majority society, we know, we know all the countries in Central and Eastern Europe, almost 10 percent of the people are with university education. For Roma, this percent is less than one.

How we can extract elite from this 0.567. We cannot. How we can talk about equal participation in society, which is the core of the Romani cause, when we have this large number, large percentage of uneducated or poorly educated Roma, and which is the result of segregation and education.

That's why I think that now is really very critical moment to have governmental programs, strategies, for the segregation. This is really critical. We cannot be integrated without equal education.

Mr. PITTS. Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you, Commissioner Pitts.

Let me ask one final question—as a matter of fact, two—very briefly, Ms. Petrova.

One country, essentially not mentioned this morning was Slovenia. Are there problems of Roma educational opportunities or otherwise, or is the situation a relatively better one vis-a-vis the other countries? Or what?

Ms. PETROVA. I actually did mention Slovenia...

Mr. SMITH. You did.

Ms. PETROVA. ... in the context of catch-up classes. The majority—and my statement also Slovenia is mentioned. We have stated that the majority of Roma in primary school in Slovenia go to separate classes, also as Croatia as well and Slovenia. Another country which was not mentioned, if I'm allowed just to add, was Poland. We have growing concerns in Poland as well, where governmental programs tend to be promoting segregated classes for the Roma.

Mr. SMITH. Let me conclude. As I think you know, the annual meeting of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly will be held in Berlin in July. I will be head of delegation and will be leading that delegation. Mr. Pitts has been a faithful participant in that, and as have other members. We hope to have a full contingent of House and Senate members going there.

One of the issues I hope to raise, and we have done it before, but I think after this hearing in particular, it might be especially fruitful if we really put the heavy emphasis on education, vis-a-vis the Roma. What could Europeans and we, in a supportive role, be doing. Any thoughts you might have on what an OSCE PA resolution should look like?

You know Erika [Schlager], who is and has been for many, many years our resident expert on Roma issues, very well. Personally and as a delegation, we would like to make a major issue of it. At the conclu-

sion of the meeting, there is a wholesale recognition of the issues—in resolution after resolution. But what does that mean if it goes under-implemented or unimplemented? Please provide your insights to us.

I would appreciate that.

Ms. PETROVA. Thank you very much for that.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you.

I would like to ask our final witness, if she would make her way to the witness table.

We are very delighted to have the Ambassador Elena Poptodorova from Bulgaria. Just a little background on her. She is Bulgaria's Ambassador to the United States, and has been since February of this year. Prior to that, she has been the spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Director of the International Organization and Human Rights at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. And, she is a peer. She was a Member of Parliament from 1990 to April 2001, served on the Committee on Foreign Policy and European Integration, National Security Committee, the Committee on Radio and Television, and the Committee on Human Rights.

And from '75 to 1990, she was in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. she speaks four languages—English, French, Italian, and Russian. She is married with one son.

Thank you for being here, and please proceed.

**HER EXCELLENCY ELENA POPTODOROVA,
AMBASSADOR OF THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA TO THE U.S.**

Amb. POPTODOROVA. Thank you, Chairman. Chairman Smith, Congressman Pitts, ladies and gentlemen. When years I was started a diplomatic career, one of the first things I heard was a rather humorous description of what diplomats were supposed to be—people who were supposed to lie for their country abroad (referring to the double meaning of the verb “to lie”.)

I believe that diplomacy has become a job of truthfulness. That's the way in which I intend to pursue my duties here in the coming period, which is still ahead of me.

I do feel privileged to speak in this Commission, and I thank you for the invitation.

I do not know whether it is a chance or a sought coincidence, but today is the Day of the Holocaust. There couldn't be a more appropriate day to discuss Roma issues and human rights.

And you would also know that April 8 was the International Day of Roma. So obviously, we are set in a very good framework for this hearing.

I would go further with your permission, even to urge you to hold hearings on other similarly painful issues such as human trafficking, corruption, which are delicate issues in my part of Europe. I would gladly participate if such hearings would be held.

The work of the Helsinki Commission, you should know, has been broadly appreciated as a stimulus to government institutions. Because you know better than I do, that human rights are a new knowledge, new experience and a new awareness for our societies. We did need not only expertise, but even an impetus, a stimulus, a demanding outside authority in drafting our legislation and institutional practices.

Therefore, it is not a matter of being polite to you when I say that the work of this Commission is very much appreciated.

You would know that the priorities of my country are membership into the European Union and NATO, which is particularly topical this year with the Prague Summit approaching in November.

And you also would know better than I that human rights minorities issues happen to be on the top of the agenda for appreciating candidates even for NATO, which seemingly is a military organization.

Therefore, it is entirely in our own interest to be able to report in a positive way to you of what we have been doing in the field of human rights and minority rights.

I've also prepared a written statement of a reasonable length, which will be distributed to you. I will go very quickly through it, highlighting the most important elements of it.

And the first thing which I have here is to underline the importance which the Bulgarian Government attributes to the issue of human rights and minority rights.

It is for the first time now, in modern Bulgaria, that we have a junior coalition partner in the government who is a party of an ethnic group. This is the movement of rights and freedoms, and it represents the interests of Bulgarian Turks.

They have two cabinet ministers and deputy ministers in all ministries.

And now a few thoughts on the main issue.

Yes, the problem is there. Denial would not help any of us. What we have to look into is how to resolve, how to remedy the situation. Having said this, I would like however, to place it in a more general context in what Bulgarian policies have been in that area.

Observation number one. The legal framework created in Bulgaria after 1990 guarantees to all Bulgarian citizens equality before the law, and precludes any form of discrimination.

Observation number two. Bulgaria has become party to all major human rights instruments of the major international organizations. Moreover, according to our constitution, they have priority over domestic legislation, particularly in those instances when domestic legislation may contravene international legislation.

As far as the public expression of Roma is concerned, I am happy to say there are numerous Roma NGOs which have been has been officially registered in Bulgaria. There are seven Roma political parties that run in both local and national elections.

Of course, it is another question whether they can run on their own and how successful would they be on their own. This is why the Roma representatives that have been elected to Parliament have usually belonged to larger coalitions, to a larger party.

Of course this is just a very modest beginning. Roma people have to be encouraged for a more convincing and more sort of—I would say aggressive in the good sense of the word—for public participation.

I wouldn't describe the problems which have already been mentioned. I can only agree and thank the previous speakers for having so systematically outlined them. I would say the two major ones are poverty and education.

It is indeed education that is the core of the other problem. Changes after 1990 were not easy, and they have not yet been completed. They have logically hit the most vulnerable groups in society. Roma happens to be the most vulnerable group. Therefore, we do have this vicious circle of poor social status, unemployment, inability to attend school, lack of any competitive skills on the labor market, which in the long run leads to a disadvantageous situation of Roma in society.

As far as the practical aspects of education are concerned, I was very happy and encouraged to hear what Mr. Russinov had to say on the project, and also on the launching of similar experience throughout the country.

But we should recognize also one other thing. Of course the political will is there, and I will say a few words on that. On the other hand, however, we need more expertise. There is yet no unified version of the Roma language. I am saying this on the basis of my experience as a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, where we were looking deeply into the Roma issue.

And one of the major problems is that there is no unified version on a European level, which will permit the establishment of a curriculum which can be applicable to all countries, and in that way will be comparable from one country to another and will increase the competitiveness of the Roma people.

So whatever efforts are being made, they are rather partial so far. And it is true that unfortunately, we still do not have full integration of Roma children, particularly at school. This closed circle—Roma family, Roma school, Roma neighborhood does not in the least facilitate the situation.

I was also happy to hear that when reporting on the situation in different countries, the two testimonies did say that in Bulgaria we do not have such severe problems which other countries face.

I would now very briefly mention some specific measures so which were adopted. We have a National Council on Ethnic and Demographic Issues, which was set up in 1997, and includes the representatives of all state authorities plus 34 ethnic minority NGOs, 21 of which represent Roma people.

This is body under the Council of Ministers. And interestingly enough, it is chaired by a minister who is of Turkish origin. He is a Bulgarian Turk.

There are chapters in 25 of the 28 districts of the country. I agree with the assessment which was given to the framework programme of the integration of the Roma. Yes, we have a general political commitment, which still has to be filled in with practical steps.

We are trying to secure financing through of course the state budget, but also through the PHARE program, the World Bank and the Development Bank of the Council of Europe.

As a matter of fact, it was only in February that the mayor of Sofia took a loan from the Bank of the Council of Europe for the rehabilitation of Roma houses in Sofia and for the building of some new houses for the Roma population in Sofia. This is something rather recent.

There is a Commission on human rights with the national police service, and currently there are 92 Roma who serve in the Bulgarian national police. You know that this is another very sensitive area. How minorities are gradually integrated into the army and into the police structures.

A council on Roma cultural issues was established at the ministry of culture, which is supposed to enhance Roma culture and Roma identity. Good education will itself promote Roma identity. So I think these two things are very much related.

The Minister of Labor already implements a series of projects and programs which are aimed at adult education and training of Roma people in order to help them find work and thus reduce the high unemployment.

Unemployment runs at the level of 70 percent at least with the Roma population, with 17 all together for the country. You see what dramatic difference we have.

I would think though, that the major challenge is to change stereotypes because there are stereotypes that are deeply rooted, and here we have both the political world, we have the role of the NGOs, we have the public, the society as a whole who should have a proactive behavior. I would say that there was one modest success. Newspaper headlines, when reporting on crime, always used an ethnic description of who committed it. Such as: an old woman stabbed by a Gypsy, etc. After a rather strong reaction to this kind of describing events which happened in every community, this approach has already gradually decreased. What I'm trying to say is that besides education, schools, political action, we also need this much more difficult efforts to make.

Solutions are not easy. We cannot do that on our own as institutions, as a society and, therefore, we very much count on assistance coming from the specialized international organizations and also from the U.S. I'm very happy that such an appeal was already launched with regard to expertise, methodology and why not even material assistance coming from U.S. foundations or other organizations.

But I do feel I have to make a general message. I think it is also particularly relevant on this day of the 9th of April.

Bulgaria is a country that has been traditionally a land of ethnic tolerance. For example, we have never had a nationalistic political party. There have been no skin heads in Bulgaria. You would have noticed that right now in Europe, unfortunately, there is an upsurge of strong anti-Semitism. This is not the case with Bulgaria. Ethnic hatred is not in our culture. It is not in the behavioristic pattern of Bulgarians and this was recognized in the years of the Holocaust even by the then German ambassador who explained in his dispatches why certain decisions of the Nazi government wouldn't be fulfilled in Bulgaria.

In these days in your country, Bulgaria is being commended for being a role model in the years of the Holocaust when it saved its 50,000 Jews, and this is the largest rescue in the Holocaust and that was as a result of a complete unity of parliament, King Boris III, the Orthodox Church and the people. This legacy has not been wasted. It is still there and because of it we realize even more that we have to live up to this understanding of preserving human life and human dignity.

Therefore, with all our imperfections, with all our drawbacks, I'd like to assure you that the good intention is there, the political will is there, positive action is there, and we are prepared to follow any recommendation—request, if you wish—in order to make all ethnic groups and the Roma group, in particular, feel comfortable—as comfortable as possible.

Thank you.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you very much for that very powerful statement.

Because I know he has another engagement, I'd like to yield to Commissioner Pitts.

Mr. PITTS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Madam Ambassador, for that wonderful statement.

A recent report on the human rights situation by the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee noted that there were fewer human rights violations recorded in Bulgaria in 2001 than in previous years and that the environment for children and ethnic minorities had improved. However,

last year's positive developments were offset by incidents of excessive use of force by police against detainees, reportedly many of whom are Roma.

Could you elaborate on what the Bulgarian Government has been doing to address this problem?

Amb. POPTODOROVA. Yes, sir, this is true. There have been incidents of police violence and police brutality. Unfortunately, it has happened also, vis-a-vis, non-Roma.

Mr. PITTS. Vis-a-vis what?

Amb. POPTODOROVA. Vis-a-vis, non-Roma people as well.

Such reports have also been brought to our attention by the annual report of the Department of State on the situation of human rights. They have been immediately looked into, and I'm testifying now as someone who was the director on human rights when we first got this information last year. We had a joint interagency meeting. There is an interagency group of representatives of the ministry of the interior, ministry of justice, border police, plus the ministry of foreign affairs to look into these specific incidents.

The result was that there was a special investigation and sanctions applied by the ministry of the interior for police brutality to anyone, not just Roma. But you're right, there are often cases of beatings, of maltreatment and, as I say, this has been brought up to the highest possible political levels—the ministers themselves—and they have instructed their staff to act with all the severity of the law.

Mr. PITTS. Special consideration is being made for Roma? Was this largely a fact of ethnic minorities or was it broadbased?

Amb. POPTODOROVA. I would say that probably the incidents of Roma would be more compared to others and that's why it was especially brought to the attention of some ministers.

Mr. SMITH. Will my friend yield just for a second?

Mr. PITTS. Yes.

Mr. Smith. You've referenced the State Department and the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* which made the point that the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee pointed out that, unlike the previous year, NGOs did not report any human rights awareness training for the police during the year, which would seem to suggest, you know, going in reverse—regression rather than progress.

The point was made that Roma prisoners reported being abused more frequently than other prisoners, and you did acknowledge that other prisoners as well had been beaten often more than once, but that Roma prisoners were reported more abused than others.

Amb. POPTODOROVA. That's what I said, unfortunately. But that's why I say we need...

Mr. SMITH. Is there any plans to do the training?

Amb. POPTODOROVA. As I told you, it is only last year that we set up this human rights unit with the police training programs are underway.

Mr. PITTS. Yes. That's the Commission on Human Rights.

Amb. POPTODOROVA. Yes, right. The Commission on Human Rights, which I mentioned.

Mr. PITTS. Do they have the authority to remedy the problems when they arise?

Amb. POPTODOROVA. Oh, yes, of course. But as you know how it is in a military structure, they always have to bring it up to their superiors, so it goes through all the channels. But they have special authority to report on all human rights abuses that may occur.

Mr. PITTS. OK. Can citizens raise concerns with the Commission directly if they have concerns?

Amb. POPTODOROVA. They can, but they raise it with complaints to the minister. What we are now working on is a law on the Ombudsman. We are trying to set up an independent human rights institution which will more or less respond to what you're saying. The draft law is already in parliament. Thus citizens can petition directly to an independent institution and all kinds of human rights abuses will be taken up by the Ombudsman's office.

Mr. PITTS. Very good. Thank you very much.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you. I appreciate it.

Let me ask you, Madam Ambassador, obviously, the framework program for equal integration of Roma in 1999 was very well received. In the *Country Reports*, and we have heard from others as well, the point is made that the key is implementation as well. What's the expectation for the adoption of anti discrimination legislation? Do you have a time line for that?

Amb. POPTODOROVA. No, there is no time limit for that. The good thing, though—the positive thing is that the working group was set up last month and started work on the draft legislation. I hope that in the foreseeable future it will be more quickly both drafted and debated in parliament.

Mr. SMITH. OK. Obviously, the sooner, the better.

Amb. POPTODOROVA. The sooner, the better, with your help.

Mr. SMITH. I know that you feel the same way.

Just one thought on the Ombudsman and the working group. Obviously, that will be a great leap forward if that is accomplished. What we have learned often though is that they are ineffective unless they have the power that can't be mitigated by the police or the chief of police or the chief constable. This brings to mind the disastrous situation that occurred even in Northern Ireland, although some of that has been remedied. You know, great sweeping statements were made about reforming the RUC. We have held hearings on that, and I've led fact-finding missions to that part of the world as well only to find that, when it came to implementation, the bad cops stayed in their positions—actually got promotions in some cases — and were in a position to do more harm and to prevent clear investigations from going forward where there had been abuse.

Is there any thought, with this Ombudsman working group, of weeding out those who commit atrocities, who do actually engage in beatings of arrested or incarcerated people?

Amb. POPTODOROVA. Sure you hit the nail on the head. This is the reason why we have been sort of using so much time on this piece of legislation. It has been in parliament, even in my time, and still we couldn't succeed in debating it earlier. This is exactly the issue; what authority this institution will have and how independent it will be and what powers it will have. So the idea is to have the Ombudsman elected by parliament.

The issue is whether it should be three-fourths or two-thirds majority in order to make him or her as independent as possible. But this is not an easy decision either. As I say, it is also a matter of a certain level, of political culture and domestic realities. There is also a temptation of keeping hold of such an important institution.

So the parties should, first of all, agree that they all reject any ambition to influence the institution and then I hope they will arrive at a mechanism for electing the Ombudsman with a mandate which will truly allow the institution to be independent.

This is the approach, but as I say, there are lots of discussions, arguments right now, which has delayed the process.

Amb. POPTODOROVA. Right. First of all, this report is particularly useful because that is this kind of outside urge which I was mentioning earlier on. We have established working relationship with your Embassy in Sofia, and these discussions referred to were held with the participation of representatives from your embassy there.

What we need to do is improve the functioning of our juridical system. This is one of the weak points now in law enforcement. We know that some changes are now underway in Parliament. But we are aware that we need improvement in enforcement and in the practical implementation of the legislation. But we are aware of it.

Mr. SMITH. I plan —as I've done in the past at previous parliamentary assemblies—to bring up language on policing. It seems to me that the Achilles heel, in addition to having a justice system that's fair, impartial and above board with judges who are competent, is a policing system that is not part of the problem, nor part of the abuse.

Mr. SMITH. In Berlin as well, I hope to be bringing up a resolution with regards to that. Hopefully, your representatives will join us in promoting that.

You mentioned earlier about the issue of trafficking. I would note for the record that human trafficking has been a major focus of our Commission. We have held a series of hearings on trafficking in this Commission; we will do more, and I take your comments as being—this is a collective scourge, modern day slavery.

We actually got comprehensive legislation passed and I will give you a copy to have you take a look at, Victims of Trafficking Violence Protection Act of 2000. I was the prime sponsor. Frankly, it has not been implemented in the way that I'd have been happy with by our own government. They've been slow; it took over a year to get major parts of this law activated. It is a law being implemented by an administration that I have very close friendship with, our own Bush administration.

They are doing more now, but it was like, "What's the holdup?" Women are being forced into prostitution every day of the week; 50,000 people mostly women, mostly for forced prostitution, are being brought into the United States every year under slave-like conditions—700,000 to 2 million around the world, so it is something we all need to do more on.

And I'm certainly happy to hear of your intense interest on that. So if there is anything you'd like to add before we end the hearing.

Amb. POPTODOROVA. Thank you and let me tell you that I'm one of you, since I have a human rights background myself. I'm always tempted to be a part of any discussion or program related to human rights. So if you feel we can be of any use, we are here, at your disposal.

Mr. SMITH. You already have been. Thank you for coming. We are very much appreciative of your participation, and your insights. To all of our distinguished witnesses, thank you so much. We will look forward to working with you going forward. The hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 12:00 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

APPENDICES**PREPARED STATEMENT OF
HON. BEN NIGHORSE CAMPBELL, CHAIRMAN,
COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE**

In 1906, Ramadan Ali, a Bulgarian Rom, brought together Romani clan leaders to demand equal rights for Roma. The budding political and national movement he represented found expression in other countries, as well. But the Holocaust crushed these fledgling efforts and, for many more decades, communist regimes either brutally repressed or cynically manipulated the emerging political aspirations of Roma. Today, Roma are reviving this movement, reaching out across borders that were once closed to each other, and finding their voice again.

The OSCE has played an important role in this process, as a forum where the participating States have pledged to each other that they will ensure the safety and equal treatment of one of Europe's largest minorities, for establishing the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights as the "contact point" on Romani human rights, and a place where Romani human rights issues can be raised and, hopefully, improved.

Almost two years ago to this day, the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities released his report on the situation of Roma in the OSCE region. In it, he remarked: "... Roma face profound challenges in virtually every sphere of social life: rates of unemployment, poverty, illiteracy and infant mortality are staggeringly high among Roma. In a classic downward spiral, each of these problems exacerbates the others in a self-perpetuating cycle." While Roma face discrimination in many areas, perhaps the most profound and long-lasting effects of discrimination stem from exclusion in the field of education. Education is a key element in the downward spiral that the High Commissioner described.

The more I learn about the plight of Roma, the more I am struck by certain parallels with the experience of American Indians here in our own country. Increasingly, Roma have begun to raise their voices not in search of special treatment, but for an opportunity to freely exercise their human rights and fundamental freedoms without discrimination.

I welcome our witnesses today who will shed light on this particular area of concern and share their insights and recommendations for the way forward.

**PREPARED STATEMENT OF DIMITRINA PETROVA,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, EUROPEAN ROMA RIGHTS CENTER**

BARRIERS TO THE EDUCATION OF ROMA IN EUROPE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For Romani children living in today's Europe, equal educational opportunity is a mirage. In some countries, more than half of the Romani child population is sent to schools for mentally handicapped children. In such schools, Romani children do not earn a diploma preparing them for life in a democratic society and competitive labor market. Quite the contrary: they are denied the right to education and emerge stigmatized as "stupid" and "retarded." They will live out their adult lives under-educated, unemployed or condemned to low-paying, menial jobs. They will be unable to realize fundamental rights, and will be deprived of basic dignity.

Elsewhere, Romani children are segregated from non-Romani children in separate classes or schools because of patterns of ghettoized settlement, or because of raw racial discrimination. Isolated from their non-Romani peers and frequently taught by under-qualified instructors, they too emerge from schooling scarred by the experience and ill-equipped for life in a multicultural democracy.

In extreme cases, as a result of the ill will of schooling authorities in specific instances or the unremedied exclusion of whole Romani communities, many Romani children in Europe receive no formal education whatsoever.

Those Romani children who fight the odds, secure a place in—and manage to remain in—mainstream schooling, suffer racist humiliation or even physical abuse by their teachers or their peers, since at present in Europe "Gypsies" are loathed, feared and scorned. In addition, few Romani or non-Romani children will ever learn, in the course of their schooling, about Romani culture, history or language, or about the rich contributions Roma have made to the societies in which they live

EXPERTISE AND INTEREST OF THE ERRC

The ERRC is an international public interest law organisation which monitors the human rights situation of Roma in Europe and provides legal defence in cases of human rights abuse. Since its establishment in 1996, the ERRC has undertaken first-hand field research in more than a dozen countries, and has disseminated numerous publications, from book-length studies to advocacy letters and public statements. A primary focus of ERRC activity has concerned the right to education: ERRC publications have focussed on educational issues, and in a number of countries, the ERRC is involved in litigation aimed at securing school desegregation. ERRC publications and additional information about the organisation are available on the Internet at <http://errc.org>.

The ERRC believes that this Congressional Hearing offers a unique opportunity for U.S. law- and policy-makers to become acquainted with some of the problems facing what is, today, Europe's most persecuted ethnic group. The ERRC is convinced that the unique history of the United States in addressing legacies of racism, and ordering and implementing school desegregation, has much to offer Europe today. This is

especially true as more-and-more Romani activists take up U.S. models of civil rights action, and fight for justice and equality, including equal access to education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is the position of the ERRC that the problem of the systematic denial to Roma of the right to education cannot be overcome without the implementation of comprehensive school desegregation programs. While the ERRC recognizes that desegregation is not a universal panacea able to remedy all problems Roma encounter in the school system, it is our contention that without comprehensive school desegregation, real change will be elusive. School desegregation is therefore the framework within which the ERRC approaches the complex of problems faced by Roma in the field of education. We understand, however, that school desegregation is a policy which cannot be pursued by civil society projects and donor interventions alone. Segregated schooling is a problem beyond the reach of small projects and one which can be resolved only via state action and with the sustained and engaged political will of government agencies. At present, however, real political will for school desegregation in Europe is lacking: Although in a few instances governments in Central and Eastern Europe have recently included the concept of desegregation in official programs, where such programs exist, they remain largely unelaborated and fully unimplemented. International involvement is crucial to ensure the real development and implementation in full of comprehensive school desegregation programs. ERRC recommendations to European governments, including recommendations in the area of desegregation, are presented below, followed by ERRC recommendations to the U.S. Government:

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS TO EUROPEAN GOVERNMENTS

- Cease immediately the practice of placing Romani children in “special schools” or “special classes” for the mentally handicapped;
- Take immediate measures to ensure that Romani children currently excluded from schooling are swiftly integrated into the mainstream school system;
- Develop and implement comprehensive national action plans for the transfer of Romani children presently in “special schools” or “special classes” for the mentally handicapped to mainstream schooling, with accompanying support programs to ease transition;
- Develop and implement similar comprehensive action plans for the desegregation of the mainstream school system;
- Ensure that adequate resources are allocated for school desegregation action plans and other programs aimed at the integration of Romani children in the school system;
- Design pre-school programs for Romani children to learn the primary language of schooling in their country or area, such that they can participate effectively in schooling from the first day of school;
- Sanction effectively abuse by schooling authorities, including:
 - practices of excluding Romani children from schooling;
 - physical abuse, verbal abuse, or other humiliating treatment of Romani children at schools;

- instances in which teachers or school administrators fail to protect Romani children from abuse by their peers, or fail to punish instances of abuse of Romani children by other children;
- Develop and implement adult education programs to remedy legacies of substandard education and non-schooling;
- Address the root problem of anti-Romani racism in Europe by developing and implementing anti-racism curriculums for schools and anti-racism campaigns for the media. At all levels, European officials must speak out to condemn racism, racist acts and patterns and practices of discrimination and segregation;
- Develop curriculum resources for teaching Romani language, culture and history in schools, and make them widely available to all schools; amend school curriculums such that all children learn of the valuable contributions Roma have made to the societies in which they live.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT

U.S. experience with school desegregation is unparalleled and U.S. desegregation expertise is needed now in Europe. The ERRC requests that the U.S. Government provide support for the development and realization of workable plans for the integrated education of Roma in Europe, in particular:

- Ensure U.S. Congressional and State Department involvement at the highest level with the governments of Europe in their efforts to develop and implement comprehensive and effective school desegregation policies in countries where Roma live;
- Ensure financial, technical and expert assistance including but not limited to:
- Sending U.S. trainers to work with European governments and other experts to develop and implement action plans for school desegregation;
- Developing abroad U.S. Government programs such as Head Start, in order to close pre-school disparities between Romani and non-Romani children;
- Promoting in Europe U.S. models of curriculum reform—crucial in the development of the United States as a multicultural society in practice and in consciousness—as one possible method of ending the exclusion of groups such as Roma, as well as of furthering the development of open, democratic societies;
- Instructing USAID, the World Bank, and other agencies to make support for comprehensive desegregation programs a top priority in countries where Roma live;
- Providing U.S. expert assistance to European ministries of finance and education to analyze the relative costs and benefits of maintaining the existing segregated school systems, as opposed to the costs of school desegregation, in order to promote recognition of the high costs of maintaining segregated education and the continuing the production of a permanent Romani underclass.

DISCUSSION: ERRC CONCERNS PERTAINING TO THE EDUCATION OF ROMANI CHILDREN IN EUROPE

Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states: “Everyone has the right to education.”¹ The principle that education, as a fundamental right, shall be free of discrimination is also enshrined in international law: Article 5(e)(v) of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), for example, states: “States Parties undertake to eliminate racial discrimination in all its forms and to guarantee the right to everyone, without distinction as to race, colour, or national or ethnic origin, to equality before the law, notably in the enjoyment of [...] [t]he right to education and training.”

Notwithstanding the near-universal recognition of the crucial role of education in the development of the free and autonomous individual—and despite the numerous international instruments which set racial discrimination beyond the pale of permissible action in all spheres of life—discrimination against Roma in the field of education is pervasive in Europe, generating lasting and crippling effects. In particular, racial segregation is widespread in the educational systems of Europe today.² Harms suffered regularly by Romani children in European school systems include:

- Segregation in schools or classes for the mentally handicapped;
- Segregation in substandard schools or classes in the mainstream educational system;
- School segregation resulting from residential segregation—“Gypsy ghetto schools”;
- Exclusion from the school system;
- Abuse in schools, including racially-motivated physical abuse.

SEGREGATION IN “SPECIAL SCHOOLS” AND/OR “SPECIAL CLASSES” FOR THE MENTALLY HANDICAPPED

A particularly debilitating form of racial segregation is the practice, prevalent in Central and Eastern Europe, of placing Romani children in so-called “special schools” or “special classes” for the mentally handicapped.

¹ The right to education is elaborated in a number of international laws and instruments, including Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and Article 29 of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). European law affirms the right to education for all. Article 2 of Protocol 1 to the European Convention of Human Rights states: “No person shall be denied the right to education. In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions.”

² The ban on racial segregation under international law is unequivocal. The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), Article 3, stipulates, “States Parties particularly condemn racial segregation and apartheid and undertake to prevent, prohibit and eradicate all practices of this nature in territories under their jurisdiction.”

During research in the eastern Czech city of Ostrava, the ERRC found that Romani children in Ostrava outnumbered non-Roma in special schools by a proportion of more than twenty-seven to one.³ Although Roma represented fewer than 5% of all primary school-age students in Ostrava, they constituted over 50% of the “special school” population. Nationwide, as the Czech Government itself conceded, approximately 75% of Romani children attend “special schools,” and during the 1998/1999 school year, more than half of all special school students were Romani.⁴ There is no indication that the situation has changed substantively in the intervening three years since the ERRC conducted intensive research into the situation of Roma in the educational system in the Czech Republic.⁵ Despite repeated pronouncements by the Czech authorities that far-reaching changes to the school system are planned, to date the Czech school system remains segregated.

The Czech Republic is not the only place where Roma are disproportionately educated in schools or classes for the mentally handicapped. In Hungary, similar trends are evident: A 1998 survey in Borsod County, northeastern Hungary, commissioned by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Ethnic and Minority Rights (“Minority Ombudsman”) revealed that 90% of children in special schools were Romani.⁶

Romani children are also reportedly segregated in special schools and special classes for the mentally handicapped in Romania.⁷ National statistics on the numbers of Romani children in such schools and classes

³ One noteworthy finding of ERRC research was that Romani children are not dramatically over-represented in so-called “auxiliary schools”—schools for children with medium to profound mental handicap. Over-representation is egregious primarily in “special schools,” schools for those children who fall in the gray area where cultural difference and early language difference can easily be mistaken for light to medium mental disability. Indeed, a very high number of the Romani children interviewed by the ERRC in Ostrava had, during original placement, been classified as “borderline cases.”

⁴ For a detailed account of the segregation of Romani children in “special schools” for the mentally handicapped in the Czech Republic, see the ERRC Country Report A Special Remedy: Roma and Schools for the Mentally Handicapped in the Czech Republic, Country Reports Series No. 8, June 1999, on the Internet at: <http://errc.org/publications/indices/czechrepublic.shtml>.

⁵ Legal complaints challenging racial segregation of Roma in special schools in the Czech Republic, filed in June 1999 by parents of a group of Romani children in Ostrava, assisted by local counsel and the ERRC, were unsuccessful at the domestic level. In its decision of October 20, 1999, the Czech Constitutional Court, acknowledging the “persuasiveness” of the applicants’ arguments, nonetheless rejected the complaints, ruling that it had no authority to consider evidence demonstrating a pattern and practice of racial discrimination in Ostrava or the Czech Republic. The Court effectively refused to apply applicable international legal standards for proving racial discrimination. Having exhausted all domestic remedies, on April 18, 2000, representing 18 Romani children from Ostrava, the ERRC and local counsel filed an application with the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. The case is currently pending before the Court.

⁶ For further details, see http://errc.org/rr_nr4_1999/snap21.shtml.

⁷ For more information on Roma and the right to education in Romania, see the ERRC Country Report State of Impunity: Human Rights Abuse of Roma in Romania, September 2001, pp. 104–120, available on the Internet at: <http://errc.org/publications/indices/romania.shtml>.

are not publicly available. However, where rough figures can be established, they are high enough to warrant serious concern. In Cluj-Napoca, for example, the school for the mentally handicapped serves about 200 children, and according to local sources over 70% of them are Romani.⁸ Discretion on placement is the purview of local schooling authorities, and anti-Romani prejudice plays a significant part in determining whether a child is placed in a special school or a special class. The ERRC has also documented a number of cases in which school authorities have resorted to placing Romani children in special classes—despite the fact that the children did not show any handicap—on grounds that they had a “disadvantaged background” or “because the teachers do not know what to do with them.”

In addition to the examples cited above, Roma are reportedly over-represented in special schools in Bulgaria, Croatia, Poland, Serbia and Montenegro, Slovakia and Slovenia. In Slovakia, reportedly more than half of the Romani student population attends special schools for the mentally handicapped.⁹ According to a report by the Open Society Institute, in Bulgaria, a majority of the 19,000 students in 130 Bulgarian schools for the mentally deficient are Romani.¹⁰

Pressure on Romani parents to send their children to “special schools” can be intense. One Romani woman in the Czech Republic, Ms Z.L., told the ERRC that school officials had attempted to bluster her into signing forms consenting to the transfer of her daughter to a school for the mentally handicapped:

My daughter is thirteen. She is in the seventh class. Two years ago they called me up to say, 'We've decided that she should go to remedial special school. Can you come and sign the papers?' I said, 'No, I don't want her to change schools.' They said, 'Well she has to now—we've already sent all her papers to the special school.' I had to go and make a big fuss to get the papers back. I still don't understand it. They never told me why they had suddenly decided that my daughter should change schools.¹¹

Psychologists and other schooling authorities in the Czech Republic confirmed that Romani parents are frequently put under pressure by schooling authorities, including by the psychologists charged with evaluating children, to consent to the transfer of their children to schools for the mentally handicapped. According to one Czech psychologist:

A psychologist or a teacher will say to the parent: 'your child does not have good results in basic school: do you agree?' The parent will agree. The authority will then say 'so your child would be better at remedial special school?' and the parent agrees, without realising that they have just given their 'formal consent' to place their child in remedial special school. And this is the whole conversation.¹²

⁸ ERRC field research, September 15, 2000, Cluj-Napoca, Romania.

⁹ Wide Open School Foundation, “Strategic Plan 2001–2003,” Slovakia, 2000, p. 11

¹⁰ Open Society Institute, *Monitoring the EU Accession Process: Minority Protection*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 2001, p. 33.

¹¹ ERRC interview, December 11, 1997, Prague, Czech Republic.

¹² ERRC interview, May 3, 1999, Olomouc, Czech Republic.

In some instances, “special schools” for the mentally handicapped attempt actively to recruit Romani children because of budgetary pressure to maintain high levels of enrolment. One former remedial special school teacher in the Czech Republic told the ERRC of efforts by a school administrator to recruit Romani children for the school:

The deputy director requested that I visit the various doctors in the area to find out how many Romani children were approaching the age of six for that year. The deputy director wanted me to obtain a list of such pupils so that they could all be enrolled into our remedial special school. In particular she explained to me that she wanted to fill up all the places available at the school for the forthcoming year. She also forced me to go to Romani families to request that the children be sent to our remedial special school¹³

While the placement of Romani children in special educational programs can occur with relative ease, around the region, reintegration from special classes or special schools into regular schooling is frequently blocked by bureaucratic obstacles and often, in practice, not possible. Conflicts of interest, such as the desire of special school administrators to keep as many pupils as possible for budgetary reasons, frequently hinder authorities' ability to render a decision in the best interests of the child. Some school directors are simply opposed to the transfer of Romani children from special classes to normal classes. In practice, few Romani pupils are ever transferred from special schools or classes to normal classes, and there is virtually no independent monitoring to ensure that placements, once made, continue to be appropriate.

The massive over-representation of Romani children in schools for the mentally handicapped—embodying the triple harm of racial segregation, substandard education and the stigma of mental handicap—is fundamentally humiliating to all Roma. As the High Commissioner for National Minorities of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe has recently noted, “[p]erhaps no legally-sanctioned practice affecting Roma is more pernicious than the phenomenon of channeling Romani children to 'special schools'—schools for the mentally disabled. [...] Aside from the obvious disadvantage this entails in terms of the sub-standard quality of education made available to Romani children—depriving them of the equal opportunity to learn and to develop as capable and self-reliant citizens—the effect is also automatically to disqualify Romani children from admission to certain secondary and tertiary educational and professional institutions.”¹⁴

SEGREGATION IN MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS

Even when Roma are taught in nominally mainstream schools, they are frequently segregated in Roma-only, remedial or “catch-up” classes and in some cases in separate, substandard buildings. Romani children in segregated classes are frequently taught according to an “adjusted curriculum” not designed to provide education on an equal footing with other students. These pupils experience the humiliation of being cordoned off from their non-Romani peers for what is frequently their en-

¹³ ERRC interview, November 15, 1998, Ostrava, Czech Republic.

¹⁴ See Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, High Commissioner on National Minorities, “Report on the Situation of Roma and Sinti in the OSCE Area,” March 10, 2000, p. 74.

ture schooling career. The effect of such schooling arrangements is to exclude Roma from equal education, and Roma suffer permanent harm as a result of their segregation on racial grounds.

In Croatia, the majority of Romani children in the primary schools are relegated to substandard, segregated classes. ERRC research in Croatia in May 2001 revealed that four out of five primary schools in Medimurje County had separate classes for Roma. According to information provided by the Medimurje County Department of Education, Culture, Sports, and Technical Education, out of the 865 Romani children enrolled in the twelve schools in Medimurje County, 511 were educated in separate classes during the 2000/2001 school year.¹⁵ Patterns of school segregation also exist in other places in Croatia. For example, in 2000, the Croatian Ombudsman condemned the segregation of Romani children in schools in Varazdin County, calling the practice “apartheid.”¹⁶

Authorities in Romania also segregate Romani children in separate classes in the regular school system solely on the basis of ethnicity.¹⁷ The ERRC is also aware of cases in which protests by non-Romani parents and their refusal to let their own children be taught together with Romani children have prevailed with school authorities. Similar allegations have been made with respect to kindergartens in Romania. For example, in Mangalia, according to local activists, parents of non-Romani children reportedly exercised pressure on the authorities of a kindergarten and threatened to transfer their children if Romani children were accepted in the institution. These events reportedly prompted formation of separate facilities for Romani children.¹⁸

In Hungary, estimates indicate that Roma make up 84.2 percent of the students in “catch-up” classes in 192 schools surveyed by the Institute for Education Research.¹⁹ School authorities reportedly have a stake in maintaining “catch-up” supporting classes because they can receive supplementary grants for the education of minority children, offered under a 1993 law.²⁰ In practice, these classes are frequently substandard, offering poor quality education in spatially segregated areas, such as run-down separate buildings. Most Romani children educated in “catch-up” classes never “catch-up” and are never mainstreamed into the normal school system. Instead, they finish their educational career in the separate system, often as early as the 5th grade. In his 1999 Annual Report, the Hungarian Minority Ombudsman stated that: “the supporting school system is nothing but a ‘blind alley’ into which unfortunately Roma children are compelled to enter in very large number. In other words, the system of supporting schools could be termed as a very special form of discrimination about young Gypsies, meaning unambiguously segregation, artificial separation.”²¹ This practice, however,

¹⁵ According to a recent article in the Croatian press, around 192 Romani children attending one segregated school in Medimurje County must enter the school building via a separate entrance (See Karlovacki List, July 24, 2001).

¹⁶ See Jutarnji List, September 7, 2000.

¹⁷ See ERRC, State of Impunity, pp. 110–111.

¹⁸ See ERRC, State of Impunity, pp. 111–112.

¹⁹ See Open Society Institute, EU Accession Monitoring Program, Monitoring the EU Accession Process: Minority Protection, 2001, p. 228, as well as information provided in the Hungarian daily Napszava, October 17, 2000.

²⁰ Act LXXVII of 1993 on the Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities.

²¹ For more information see, The Parliamentary Commissioner for National and Ethnic Minority Rights, report 1999, at: <http://www.obh.hu/nek/en/reports/reports.htm>.

has not been curbed since. A 2002 investigation of the Minority Ombudsman established that the Romani students of the Verpelét primary school, Heves County, are educated in separate classes, starting from the first grade, without the express consent or request of their parents.²²

Non-Romani parents in Spain have engaged in civic action to attempt to prevent the enrollment of Romani children in schools, actions that have resulted in the effective racial segregation of Romani children in the school system. In an episode which made national headlines in Spain, beginning April 14, 2000, parents of the 633 students of San Juan Bosco school in the northern Spanish town of Barakaldo protested against the admission of three Romani children. The children had been without schooling since March 31, 2000, when the public school they attended was closed. On May 10, 2000, the Romani children had their first day at San Juan Bosco school, but were the only students present. They were accompanied by Mr Jesús Giménez of the association Iniciativa Gitana, the thirty teachers of the school and a police escort, while parents protested vigorously in the street. The non-Romani parents had voted to boycott the school. Local authorities put the matter in the hands of the district attorney for juvenile affairs, who threatened non-Romani parents with legal action if they did not comply with the obligation to send their children to school. Under this threat, over 90% of the students were back in school on May 15. However, the three Romani children were reportedly placed in a separate classroom with no other students²³

In the Slovenian town of Leskovec pri Krskem, in the local primary school, Romani children in grades 1-4 attend separate classes in a separate school building that stands next to the main building. Similarly, authorities in several towns in southern Poland reportedly took advantage of the existence of a private schooling project aimed at reducing illiteracy among Roma and transferred all local Romani children into separate classes, literate or not.

“GHETTO SCHOOLS”

In some instances, Roma are placed in inferior quality schools as a result of residential segregation: ghetto children go to ghetto schools. In such schools, the overwhelming majority of children are Romani, and although the schools often formally offer a standard curriculum, education is in practice substandard because teachers lack basic qualifications, textbooks are out-of-date, teaching aids are lacking, and school buildings are run-down and ill-equipped to provide for quality education²³

In Bulgaria, for example, generally, ghetto schools are generally dilapidated buildings, often with broken windows covered in barbed wire, paint peeling off the walls, and classrooms with few decorations. Such schools are usually overcrowded and lack basic facilities; classes are not held regularly; some Romani students who graduate from these schools can hardly read or write; and in many cases teachers do not have the qualifications required by law. In addition, underlying negative prejudices towards Roma held by non-Romani teaching staff often

²² Roma Press Center, Electronic Weekly, February 25, 2002.

²³ For further information on the incident, see http://errc.org/rr_nr2_2000/snap9.shtml.

result in degrading treatment of Romani school children. It has been estimated that around 70% of all Romani children in Bulgaria attend such schools²⁴

In many towns and cities in Portugal, there are large communities of shanty-dwellers, and some such communities are predominantly or exclusively Romani. The squalor and deprivation of such sites is often extreme: houses are made of debris and often have no electricity or proper sanitation. Romani settlements frequently have no heating, sanitation or washing facilities. Schools in such communities are substandard ghetto schools in which Romani children are frequently the majority of pupils. Such conditions prevail, for example, in the town of Coimbra, as well as in a number of other communities.

Spatial segregation also leads to the segregation of Romani children in schools in Moldova. For example, the school in the Romani community in Schinoasa is in very poor condition, is staffed with unqualified teachers, and is frequently not open. The school building in Schinoasa is situated in the yard of a Romani family in the community. At the time of an ERRC visit in December 2001, it comprised two small rooms, which were filled with dilapidated desks and blackboards. There were no windows in the building and the glass pane was missing from the window in the entrance door. At the time of the ERRC visit, a book had been placed where the glass once had been. The building also lacked a source of heat and in wintertime the inside of the school is reportedly only slightly warmer than outside. The teaching staff at the school in Schinoasa consists of two non-Romani teachers from the nearby town of Tibirica who reportedly possess only an elementary school education themselves. During several visits by the ERRC to the community, the school was not even open and the teachers were nowhere to be found. Romani children in the community report that the teachers are only present at the school for two hours per day, although not every day. The level of knowledge of the children also attests to this. Many older pupils at the school are unable to read or write. Romani children attending the school in Schinoasa also stated that they have no textbooks, and that their parents cannot afford to purchase notebooks, pens, or pencils, necessary for their lessons. Their parents told the ERRC that they frequently cannot afford food. Romani children in Schinoasa rarely attend classes past the fourth class. From the fifth class, Romani children must travel to Tibirica to attend school. Romani children from Schinoasa attending school in Tibirica—at the time of a recent visit by the ERRC in December 2001 there were reportedly less than five such children—are allegedly subjected to violence and ridicule by their classmates and teachers because they are Romani. Students report being beaten by their fellow pupils in Tibirica, and being called names by their teachers. ERRC field research indicates that the situation is similar in other settlements in Moldova as well²⁵

²⁴ For further information on ghetto schools in Bulgaria see especially: http://www.errc.org/rr_nr3_2000/noteb3.shtml, as well as European Roma Rights Center and the Open Society Institute, "Conference Report: The Desegregation of 'Romani Schools': A Condition for an Equal Start for Roma, Sofia, Bulgaria, April 27, 2001."

²⁵ For further information on the situation of Roma in Moldova, see <http://errc.org/publications/indices/moldova.shtml>.

EXCLUSION FROM SCHOOL

Many Romani children never have the opportunity to attend school at all. In some places, a combination of bureaucratic obstacles and poverty work effectively to exclude many Romani children from the school system entirely. In others, non-Romani parents and/or school officials block the enrolment of Romani children in schools.

Numerous Romani children in Romania, for example, have been blocked from enrolling in schools by officials who have justified their actions with reference to residence permit requirements, as well as with reference to the fact of birth abroad. In the years following the collapse of the Ceausescu regime in 1989, Romania was the site of approximately thirty anti-Romani pogroms featuring killings and the expulsion of whole communities from villages. Many of the victims, along with Roma who have left villages in search of work opportunities in cities, now lead extremely marginal existences on the outskirts of Romania's larger towns and cities, most notably Bucharest. Unable to procure residence permits for what is often no more than cardboard box housing, Roma are unable to enroll their children in schools. In other instances, a lack of identity documents has been used as a pretext for denying Romani children access to school.²⁶ In Timisoara, near the western border of Roma-

²⁶ Human rights researcher Ina Zoon has written recently on the importance of documents for—and the role of a lack of documents in precluding Roma from—realizing basic rights in Romania:

“The existence of identification documents is the sine qua non for accessing social welfare benefits, health services, or public housing. Not having such documents seriously affects the exercise of many other rights by placing a person's freedom in danger, jeopardizing his or her participation in community life, and barring access to employment and education. The lack of documents is one of the most important problems confronting a large segment of the Roma population in Romania. [...] The most frequently mentioned missing documents are birth certificates and identification cards. The lack of civil marriage certificates raises difficult legal issues but also sensitive cultural ones related to the acceptance of the civil institution of marriage within the Roma community. [...] Birth certificates may be missing because children are born at home, and parents neglect or postpone registering the newborn. Legal provisions that provide high fines for delays in registering children, the social workers' lack of interest in assisting Roma, and the corruption within the administration are additional obstacles to obtaining birth certificates. Experts describe the lack of birth certificates, identity cards, and civil marriage certificates as a 'mass phenomenon'. Thousands do not have legal documents that reflect their family relationships and legal status correctly.” (See Zoon, Ina, *Op. cit.*, pp.35–36). In the extreme case, the Roma concerned may be stateless. A forthcoming report by Save the Children UK estimates that 1200–6000 Roma in Romania may be stateless (Save the Children Fund UK, “Denied a Future? The Right to Education of Roma/Gypsy and Traveler Children,” draft May 2001 (final report, forthcoming, October 2001), p. 25). The recently published Romanian Government “Strategy of the Government of Romania for Improving the Condition of Roma” acknowledges that statelessness is a problem among Roma when it lists “solving the cases of stateless Roma in Romania” as a goal of government policy (The Government of Romania, Ministry of Public Information, “Strategy of the Government of Romania for Improving the Condition of the Roma”, Bucharest 2001, adopted as Government Resolution 430, official translation, p. 8).

nia, Romani parents wishing to enroll their children in a local school were told by authorities that this was impossible because their children did not have birth certificates issued in Romania.²⁷ Similarly, Roma forcibly returned from Germany have been denied access to schooling because education officials in Romania have refused to recognize their schooling abroad.²⁸ Parents in the Zabrauti neighborhood of Bucharest told the ERRC in February 2001 that their children had been refused enrolment in the local school for years until a member of parliament intervened.²⁹

Similar administrative obstacles to the enrolment of Romani children in schools have been documented in France. The non-governmental organization Socio-Educative Tzigane d'Aquitaine (USETA) reported to the ERRC that during the academic school-year 1999/2000, members of the organization noticed a growing number of obstacles to implement the right to education for Romani schoolchildren. Romani children were refused either in pre-school, elementary or secondary schools for various apparently pre-textual reasons: lack of places, lack of teaching materials, no certificate of schooling to evaluate the academic level of the children. In one school, a pedagogical team reportedly fixed an arbitrary quota on the number of Romani children allowed in school "to prevent conflict situations."³⁰

Journalists from TeleMadrid, a private local television station in Spain, have recently conducted tests of kindergartens using hidden video cameras (a lawful practice in Spain), in order to document discriminatory practices in admissions procedures. One journalist was given extensive advice by a member of the state organization of kindergartens as to how to open a kindergarten such that no Romani children would come to it. The interviewed official sternly admonishes the journalist, who had posed as a person wishing to open a kindergarten, not to admit any "Gypsy children" at all, "or else soon you will be swamped with Gypsies." In the video recording, the same administrator advises the journalist not to explicitly discriminate, "since this would be illegal," but rather to place Romani children indefinitely on a waiting list until the parents' interest in enrolling their children waned. The videotape was broadcast on a number of Spanish television stations and provoked nationwide debate.

Many Romani children in Italy live in segregated "camps for nomads" and effectively have no access to the Italian school system. Distances between segregated camps and schools are often exacerbated by frequent evictions. During raids, police authorities often destroy the school supplies of Romani children. In numerous cases, Roma live in camps far away from schools. Non-citizen Roma threatened with expulsion—

²⁷ For further details of the case, see ERRC, *State of Impunity*, p. 109.

²⁸ OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities found that, "Although some of the children in question attended school while abroad (not a few of them thrived; among those who emigrated to Germany, many quickly mastered the German language), the local schools in Timisoara did not recognize their foreign schooling for purposes of placement." See Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, High Commissioner on National Minorities, *Op. cit.*, p. 73.

²⁹ See ERRC, *State of Impunity*.

³⁰ For more information on the issue, see http://errc.org/rr_nr3_2000/noteb6.shtml.

and this category includes persons who have been in Italy for long periods of time or were born there—have in many cases pulled their children out of school in order to go into hiding.³¹

In Greece, in November 2000, in an effort to exclude Romani children from school, authorities in the municipality of Halastra near Thessaloniki, Greece, closed a local public primary school for approximately one week. The closing came as a result of pressure from the local non-governmental parents and guardians association, according to information provided to the ERRC by the Thessaloniki-based Drom Network for Gypsy Social Rights. The parents and guardians association reportedly protested the enrolment of Romani children from the Aghia Sophia Gonou community, near Thessaloniki. A compromise was eventually reached, according to which only half of the 16 Romani pupils newly allocated to the school would continue their education there, and the school re-opened one week later.³² Despite Greek legal provisions stating that children should attend school in the school closest to the place where they live, to date, the other eight children concerned attend schools as far as 17 kilometers from their homes.

In other instances, Romani children already enrolled and attending school are driven out of the school system again. There are, for example, widespread reports that Romani children in Hungary are dramatically over-represented among children involved in so-called “private student” arrangements which effectively exclude them from schooling. Pupils can become “private students” if both parents and school officials agree to waive mandatory school attendance and allow the child to learn at home. The provision is intended for especially talented children, but there are disturbing reports of teachers putting pressure on Romani parents to accept private schooling arrangements if their children have discipline problems or on grounds of raw racial prejudice. ERRC field research in the eastern Hungarian town of Berettyóújfalú in 2000 revealed that all nine of the children involved in “private schooling” programs in the town were Romani and that many were repeatedly failing periodic examinations.³³ The effect of coercing Romani children into “private student” arrangements is to force them from the school system.

Finally, in countries including Greece, Italy, Romania, and Serbia and Montenegro, non-schooling may be a component of a comprehensive non-integration of Roma. Whole communities of Roma in Romania live on dumpsites, and the efforts of non-governmental organizations to assist Roma in enrolling their children in school have met with obstruction at nearly every official instance. Roma living in so-called “unauthorized camps” in Italy—temporary roadside shelters erected without permit and frequently knocked down by police and municipal authorities—are similarly completely excluded from Italian society. In

³¹ For further information on the situation of Roma in Italy in general, as well as in the Italian educational system in particular, see the ERRC Country Report *Campland: Racial Segregation of Roma in Italy*, October 2000, available on the Internet at: <http://errc.org/publications/indices/italy.shtml>.

³² For more information see http://errc.org/rr_nr1_2001/snap30.shtml.

³³ Full statistical information on the schooling situation of Romani children in Berettyóújfalú in the 2000–2001 school year is available at: http://errc.org/rr_nr3_2000/noteb5.shtml.

such instances, the non-schooling of Romani children is one component of the complete marginalization of whole Romani communities. Not going to school is both effect and reflection of the total legal non-existence of thousands of Roma in Europe. One result of such exclusion is the reproduction of generations of persons with no prospects and no chances to realize aspirations for a better future.

ABUSE IN SCHOOL

Roma suffer abuse in schools by non-Romani children and parents, as well as by schoolteachers and administrators. Teachers and administrators frequently turn a blind eye to racist abuse by non-Romani children. In the worst cases, schooling officials themselves physically abuse Romani children or insult their ethnic origins, bringing home the lesson of racism. At a very young age, many Roma and non-Roma are taught that hate, humiliation and even physical abuse on racist grounds is acceptable or at least tolerated.

An ERRC interview in March 1998 with a ten-year-old Romani girl from the village of Bontida, near Cluj-Napoca in Romania, revealed that her schoolmaster had pulled her ear so hard that it had bled and medical assistance was required.³⁴ One primary school student from the Hungarian town of D[”]ms[”]d, approximately fifty kilometers south of Budapest, told the ERRC that her teachers had on one occasion called Romani girls at her school “stinking little Gypsy whores” and had hit a Romani classmate of hers. Although Romani parents complained to authorities at the school about the incident, the teacher in question was reportedly never reprimanded.³⁵ According to ERRC research in Novi Sad, Serbia and Montenegro, in March 2002, two Romani children from Kosovo temporarily withdrew from school after their mathematics teacher hurled a notebook at them, striking one of them.³⁶ One Romani boy who had been enrolled in both German and Macedonian schools told the ERRC in an interview conducted in August 1997 that he preferred German schools because, “in Macedonian schools, teachers hit me.”

In May 2001, an ERRC staff member observed the aftermath corporal punishment in schools first-hand, when she visited a primary school in the northern Croatian village of Orehovica. Noticing a six-year old Romani boy relegated to the corner of the room, she inquired as to why he was being punished and was told that the young boy had been caught writing on the wall and as a result the teacher had hit his head against the wall several times. When later asked about the incident, the teacher justified her actions by saying that, “These children come in with real behavior problems because their parents don't care about them. They need to be taught to behave.”³⁷

Non-Romani children also ridicule and humiliate Romani children without effective intervention from instructors. For example, a thirteen-year-old Romani girl from Alexandria, Romania told the ERRC in a 2000 interview that, “[My schoolmates] said that I was Gypsy and that I was not supposed to be there.” In Serbia and Montenegro, the Belgrade-based non-governmental organization Humanitarian Law Center (HLC), in cooperation with the ERRC, has documented numer-

³⁴ For further details of the case, see ERRC, *State of Impunity*, p. 116.

³⁵ For more information on the case, see http://errc.org/rr_sum1998/notebook_2.shtml.

³⁶ ERRC interviews, Novi Sad, Serbia and Montenegro, March 14, 2002.

³⁷ For more information, see http://errc.org/rr_nr4_2001/field1.shtml.

ous cases of Romani children being systematically harassed and verbally and physically abused by their non-Romani classmates. For example:

- Zaim Berisa, a thirteen-year-old fourth-grade student in Zaga Malivuk primary school in Belgrade, reported that his non-Romani classmates frequently call him names and sometimes hit and kick him. In September 1999, five non-Romani boys reportedly attacked Zaim in the schoolyard, hitting him in the stomach and face. The school janitor reportedly put an end to the attack and informed the school principal of the incident. Zaim's mother, Ms Ljubica Stankovic, confirmed that he came home that day with bruises on his face and a swollen nose, and that she had to take him to the doctor. She complained to the school principal, who promised to speak to the boys and to prevent any further attacks. Nevertheless, a few days later, the same group of boys attacked Zaim and his fifteen-year-old brother, Safet, at the train station as they were returning home from school. This time, one of the boys had a knife. Zaim managed to run away but the attackers beat his brother until a neighbour intervened.
- Zoran Miladinovic, a nine-year-old second-grade Romani student at Cirilo i Metodije school in Belgrade, stated that the non-Romani children slap him and call him names almost every day. Zoran complained to his teacher, who reportedly told him it was best to ignore the other children when they called him names. In September, two boys attacked Zoran in the schoolyard, one of them holding him, while the other punched him in the head. Both of them shouted racist insults. Ms Radmila Miladinovic, Zoran's mother, stated that on that day her son came home from school with a bleeding mouth, complaining that he had been beaten by the other children.
- Kristina Stanojevic, an eleven-year-old fifth grade student at Banovic Strahinja school in Belgrade, stated that when she was in the fourth grade her classmates frequently taunted her and her two Romani classmates, calling them names such as "filthy Gypsy," and pushed, slapped and kicked her.

According to HLC, teachers are reluctant to take action to guarantee the safety of Romani pupils in schools throughout Serbia and Montenegro. One Romani parent in the Czech Republic told the ERRC:

Patricia, my youngest daughter, sits in the classroom with a boy who is constantly insulting her. After school I have to pick her up because the boy waits for her and hits her. She is only seven and is very scared. My son Michal is attending eighth grade. He has no friends and sits on his own at the back of the classroom. He is the only Romani pupil in the classroom and the other pupils in the class regularly insult him³⁸

CONCLUSION: THE EFFECTS OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

According to a publication by the Open Society Institute, in 1992, only 35 percent of Romani children in Spain completed primary education on time, while 51 percent had failed one grade and 14 percent had failed two or more grades.³⁹ The situation is little changed today, and

³⁸ For further details of the case, see ERRC, *A Special Remedy*, p. 95.

³⁹ McDonald, Christina, Judit Kovacs, Csaba Fenyves eds., *The Roma Education Resource Book*, Budapest: Open Society Institute, pg. 28.

illiteracy among Roma in Spain is estimated at around 50 percent. Reliable data has recently revealed that the number of Romani children who attend school in Croatia after the fourth grade drastically diminishes⁴⁰ In its 2000 report on Croatia, the U.S. Department of State expressed concern that “Romani children face serious discrimination in schools, and nearly all drop out by grade 8.”⁴¹ In Portugal, according to government statistics, during the 1997/1998 school year 6.8% of Romani pupils dropped out of the lower level of primary education, and 28.6% of Romani children dropped out of the upper level of primary education.⁴²

In crisis and post-crisis areas, the non-schooling of Roma has reached dramatic proportions. For example, according to research conducted by the Sarajevo-based Romani organization *Nasa buducnost* (Our Future) for the academic year 1995/96, only one third of Romani children of school age in the Sarajevo Canton actually attended primary schools.⁴³ Among the children of Romani returnees from Western European countries, participation in the formal educational system is even rarer—reportedly only 5% of families of Romani returnees to the Tuzla-Podrinje Canton had children in the Bosnian school system in 1999,⁴⁴ and among Romani returnees in the Brcko District, reportedly only 20 children from a total of 206 families were attending school in 2001.⁴⁵ As primary reasons for non-attendance, Romani parents and children interviewed by various non-governmental organizations have cited pressure caused by extreme poverty for children to become breadwinners, and fears of racially-motivated abuse in the classroom. Bosnian authorities have to date done little to ensure that Roma realize the right to education; nearly all educational projects targeting Roma in Bosnia are non-governmental.

The number of Roma who manage to remain in the educational systems of their countries to the university level are in many cases only in the single digits. To name only one example, although there are prob-

⁴⁰For example, according to information from the Medimurje County Department on Education, Culture, Information, Sports, and Technical Education, in the school year 2001/2002, in four of the schools in the County (Podturen, Orehovica, Macinec, and Kursanec), the total number of Romani children enrolled from the 1st to 4th grade was 398, while their number from the 5th to the 8th grade was 122, or more than 3 times lower (Response of the Medimurje County Department on Education, Culture, Information, Sports, and Technical Education to the Croatian Ministry of Education and Sports about the “Request for information regarding the segregation of Romani children in the primary schools of Medimurje County”, Cakovec, 7 December, 2001).

⁴¹See U.S. Department of State, Croatia, Country reports on Human Rights Practices – 2000, February 23, 2001, at: <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2000/eur/716.htm>.

⁴²According to official sources, in the Portuguese city of Coimbra, in the 1997/1998, 136 Romani pupils enrolled for in lower primary education, but only seven enrolled for upper primary education. In the Ingote primary school, the main primary school for the Romani community in Coimbra, in the year 1998/1999, 15.2% left school; 21% failed the year; 25.6% were absent more than regulations allow.

⁴³See Save the Children, *Denied a Future?*, London, 2001.

⁴⁴Helsinki Citizens Assembly and Roma Associations from Tuzla, “Analysis on the Current Status of the Roma Returnees to the Tuzla Canton”, 1999, quoted in Save the Children, *Denied a Future?*, London, 2001.

⁴⁵Sae Roma, “Bulletin No. 17”, Tuzla, 2001.

ably more than 100,000 Roma in Moldova, according to the Moldovan Government's own data, for the 1999/2000 academic year, there were only eight Romani students registered in the forty-three higher education institutions on the whole territory of Moldova. This situation is actually apparently worse than in the previous academic year, during which there were, according to the government's own reports, forty-three Romani students registered in thirty-eight institutions of higher education.

All over Europe, Roma are failing to realize the right to education, and authorities are doing little or nothing to address this fact seriously. Racism is a primary factor in the non-schooling of Roma in Europe. Non-governmental organizations working to assist Romani children in enrolling in schools report that they have met with hostility from nearly all authorities concerned. As a result, whole Romani communities in Europe receive no schooling whatsoever. In addition, because of racism and the stigma attached to the Romani identity, many of Europe's educated Roma vigorously deny their ethnic origins; at present, such denial seems, sadly, to be among the best strategies for Roma determined to pass successfully through the education systems of Europe.

The preceding pages have provided an outline of the ERRC's most fundamental concerns with respect to the right of Roma to education in today's Europe. The complex of burdens weighing on Romani children in European schools is among other things the result of centuries of coercive policies of assimilation, in which the Romani identity has been the object of intense stigma, and Romani culture, language and history has been denied a place among the legitimate cultures of Europe. Romani/non-Romani relations, played out in the classroom are also, sadly, burdened by a legacy of episodes of the persecution of Roma—most recently during the Holocaust in World War II—intense periods of hate and aggression which have never been recognized adequately, let alone redressed. Even if all racist schooling practices against Roma and all practices effectively denying the right of Roma to education were ended tomorrow, European schooling would still require positive, proactive policies for Roma, aimed at overcoming the legacies of such persecution.

Today, however, racist practice in European schools is alive and well. In addition to the concerns detailed above, one could add that almost nowhere do European school curriculums recognize the contributions Roma have made to the histories and cultures of the countries in which they live, almost nowhere do Romani and non-Romani children learn about Romani history and culture in the schools they attend, in few schools is the Romani language offered as a second language, and in none whatsoever is it a language of primary instruction. European schooling is, at present, monochrome.

**PREPARED STATEMENT OF
RUMYAN RUSSINOV, DIRECTOR,
ROMA PARTICIPATION PROJECT**

Chairman Smith and members of the Commission, thank you very much for inviting me again to testify before you. Today I will speak about school desegregation in Central and Eastern Europe. This is the first major issue around which large numbers of Roma in my country, Bulgaria, and other countries in the region have coalesced. Why have they coalesced in an evergrowing movement around this issue?

In the past decade, Central and Eastern Europe has undergone significant efforts toward democratic reform. Alongside this process, however, we have witnessed a reverse tendency affecting the Roma who number some 10 million in the region. The Roma alone became even more isolated, even more segregated, even more excluded from the opportunities and the prospects enjoyed by the other citizens of our countries. Discrimination against Roma is a pervasive problem which generates severe consequences for the Romani minority and serious social crises in our societies.

Numerous factors have determined the present exclusion of Roma. To mention just a few—the historic persecution and discrimination of Roma; the assimilationist policies of the communist governments; and the deep-seated prejudices held by the majority. More than anything else, however, the discriminatory policies towards Roma in the area of education, have produced and continue to produce inequality and near total exclusion of Roma. This problem is particularly conspicuous in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which have sizable Romani communities. A system of racially segregated education in these countries confined several generations of Roma to the bottom of the social hierarchy. To date, segregation of Roma in education continues without any effective intervention on the part of governments, on the contrary, in many instances, it is being condoned by the public authorities.

In its most egregious form segregation in education channels Romani children to special schools for the mentally handicapped. These are substandard educational facilities, which offer no prospects for integration of Roma in the mainstream education system or in society in general. Everywhere in Central and Eastern Europe Roma are over-represented in these special schools, in the overwhelming number of cases their Romani ethnicity is the sole factor for their placement in these schools. Unofficial statistics indicate that up to 80% of the Romani children in the Czech Republic attend schools for the mentally handicapped. Similarly, in Slovakia this number is about 75%. High numbers of Roma in Hungary are also tracked to special schools. Roma are excluded from the mainstream education systems in a variety of other ways: outright exclusion; or they are maneuvered into inferior all-Romani schools; or, they are placed in segregated classes within the mainstream schools.

In a number of countries including Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Serbia the majority of the Romani students attend segregated schools located in segregated Romani neighborhoods. In Bulgaria for example, about 70% percent of the Romani children attend the so called “Gypsy schools” which are notorious for the inferior standard of education. The “Gypsy schools” in Bulgaria were established in the 1950s and were officially labeled “schools for children with inferior lifestyle and culture.” They had a substandard curriculum, which was intended to teach basic literacy and vocational skills. Despite the fact that in the early

1990s the Bulgarian Government standardized the curriculum of the “Gypsy schools” the inferior status of the education in these schools remained unchanged. The inferior education environment in these schools is the product of continual neglect of the education needs of Romani children and a policy of placing unqualified teachers in them. Underlying racial prejudice towards Roma on part of the non-Romani teaching staff account for the degrading treatment of the children in the all-Romani schools.

School segregation and the resulting inferior education to which the overwhelming majority of Roma in Central and Eastern Europe are subjected has a devastating effect on Romani communities. Each year, hundreds of thousands of Romani children stand diminishing chances to live a normal life. High numbers of Roma drop out of school after the primary years and are unable to reintegrate; the few who manage to finish high school in the segregated system are often illiterate or have acquired only rudimentary reading and writing skills and for them university education is unobtainable. For example, according to the 1992 census in Bulgaria, the number of Roma who graduated from universities was 0.1% of the total number of Roma. The respective share among the majority population was about 9%. The low educational status of Roma preconditions their disproportionate unemployment rates—ranging from 70 to 90 percent in the region and their further exclusion from civic life. Consequently, Romani communities are not able to produce their own elites, which could become the engines for the development of the community. School segregation of Roma has had the effect of stigmatizing Roma as an inferior ethnic group. The physical separation of the Roma community on the outskirts of towns and villages has further contributed to the prejudice against Roma by the majority, and eventually will undermine the cohesion of our societies. Current attempts on the part of the governments to restore this cohesion through implementing policies integrating Roma are doomed to fail as they do not attack one of the root causes for the exclusion of Roma—the lack of equal educational opportunities.

The first initiative to challenge school segregation was made in 2000 in the city of Vidin, Bulgaria by Roma. The Open Society Institute's Roma Participation Program, which I direct, supported a local Romani organization, to initiate the desegregation of the local all-Romani school. Some 400 children from the all-Romani school were bused to the mainstream schools. Adult Roma monitors were placed in the receiving schools to address any problems which might arise; pupils were given extra curricular lessons and structured homework sessions and the very poorest children received a daily lunch bag to take to school. This effort was reported in the New York Times on June 14, 2001 by John Tagliabue (see attached).

The successful integration of today some 600 Romani children in the mainstream Vidin schools continues in the current school year. The Vidin initiative provides a viable model upon which to build a strategy for nation-wide school desegregation in Bulgaria and to thereby ensure equal access to quality education for Romani children. In 2001 Romani NGOs in 5 other cities in Bulgaria have made impressive efforts to initiate school desegregation by introducing the Vidin model.

With the support of the Roma Participation Program, efforts to ensure equal educational opportunities for Romani children have also started in Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The initial steps

in these countries involve preparatory pre-school activities for Romani children in order to prepare them to pass the tests for mainstream school entrance.

Several recent international fora highlighted the growing consensus among Romani activists and Romani parents in Central and Eastern Europe that the existing patterns of segregated education of Romani children place them at lifelong disadvantage in comparison with their non-Romani peers and should be eliminated. Romani activists and parents urged the international community to pressure governments in Central and Eastern Europe to desegregate the schools. At the World Conference against Racism in Durban in August 2001, the Roma delegates called for school desegregation and had the language for it adopted in the final Conference document. The OSCE Conference entitled "Equal Opportunities for Roma and Sinti: Translating Words into Deeds," held in September 2001 in Bucharest, endorsed the urgent need to start to desegregate education for Roma.

At the domestic level, however, our efforts to translate Roma political will for the desegregation of schools have met with only partial success so far. Although many governments in Central and Eastern Europe have adopted policies on Roma, which deal with the issue of education, these policies remain largely unimplemented. Nowhere in Central and Eastern Europe have governments undertaken concrete actions to resolve school segregation.

The nationwide desegregation of schools cannot be carried out by grassroots initiatives or NGOs only. It will take comprehensive strategies and resources that can only be provided by the state. The sustainability of the desegregation initiatives we have undertaken depends on the full involvement of government. The failure of our governments to take resolute steps to eradicate segregation of Roma betrays a dangerous shortsightedness with respect to the general socio-economic development of our countries. The avalanche-like growth of uneducated or poorly educated Roma destroys not only our own Roma communities, it undermines the stability of the social processes in general. Each year in which the status quo of segregated education is allowed to remain increases the burden on society and makes social development less predictable and less controllable.

We need the support of your Commission and of the U.S. Congress and U.S. Government agencies, such as USAID, to fight this fundamental inequality. We ask you, for immediate political, financial and technical support to help us achieve equal education opportunities. Your American experience with school desegregation is the model we are trying to learn from. We need American civil rights leaders to come to our countries and address the issue with the highest level of government and with the public. We need the World Bank and the U.S. Government to show these countries the exorbitant costs of running parallel school systems and to find ways through loans and grants to help our governments finance systemic school desegregation. We need the World Food Program's School Lunch Program to provide lunches to Roma children whose families are too poor to do so themselves. We need the presence of groups like IRI and NDI in the region to help build Roma political capacity in national elections.

We need also the direct support of the U.S. Congress and we ask you to keep the pressure on your counterparts in our national parliaments, in the European parliament and on your own American Ambassadors to support school desegregation for the Roma people.

Chairmen Smith and Campbell, thank you for continuing support.

**PREPARED STATEMENT OF
HER EXCELLENCY ELENA BORISLAVOVA POPTODOROVA,
AMBASSADOR OF THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA
TO THE UNITED STATES**

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished members of the Commission, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for the invitation to participate in this hearing. It is, indeed, a great honor for me to appear before you today and speak on behalf of my Government on a topical issue of concern for Bulgaria, Europe and the US. The protection and the promotion of the rights of Roma people quite justly stand in the focus of attention of governments, human rights activists and international bodies such as the UN, EU, OSCE and the Council of Europe. We are thankful to the Helsinki Commission of the US Congress for taking the lead in organizing a series of hearings on the same subject here, in Washington. This hearing symbolically coincides with the International Day of Roma, 7 April, as well as with the International Day of the Holocaust which is today.

The work of the Helsinki Commission is broadly appreciated both among Bulgarian politicians and human rights activists, many of whom as “dissidents” under the totalitarian regime were inspired by America’s overall commitment to freedom and democracy.

I would also like to thank the previous speakers who have outlined a realistic picture of problems, experiences and solutions with regard to improving the protection of the human rights of Roma in the OSCE area.

Let me start with a few general comments. There is no doubt that finding solutions to the complex issues of full-fledged integration and equal participation of Roma minorities in European democratic societies is inseparably linked to the existence of functioning systems of democracy, market economy, rule of law and human rights protection as a whole. No European government facing such issues can claim to be democratic, without addressing them properly and effectively. Due to specific historic, economic and cultural factors, the social integration of Roma population features high on the agenda of many European countries. This is especially true of those countries in Central and Eastern Europe who have substantial Roma minorities and are, at the same time, undergoing radical reforms and deep transformation of their societies.

Mr. Chairman, We are proud of the fact that in the past 12 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall my country—Bulgaria has been widely recognized as a positive example and a factor of stability in Southeast Europe, notably for having preserved its long-standing tradition of peaceful interethnic relations and a social climate of tolerance and solidarity. Against the background of permanent crises and instability in the Western Balkans and facing serious economic hardships Bulgaria has succeeded in maintaining political stability, holding a series of free and democratic elections, strengthening its democratic institutions, applying European standards in protecting the rights of its citizens. A most significant achievement of the Bulgarian people today is the obvious absence of interethnic problems or tensions that could potentially develop into a violent conflict, as well as the overwhelming public rejection of policies and politicians of aggressive nationalist and extremist brand. Bulgaria’s foreign policy priorities of becoming a member of NATO and the EU are based on a firm consensus among the political parties and a strong public support for fulfilling with commitment all necessary criteria for membership.

Let me also add that rejecting aggressive nationalism and applying democratic European standards in both its domestic and foreign policy, Bulgaria has developed excellent relations with all its neighbors. It has conducted a consistent and proactive regional policy in defense of universal human rights and fundamental freedoms and has acted as a true partner and a de facto ally of the US and NATO—e.g. during the Kosovo crisis in 1999, the ethnic hostilities in the Republic of Macedonia in 2001 and, most recently, in the US-led global campaign against terrorism. I should also mention that Bulgaria now serves its term as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council and is an indisputable candidate for OSCE Chairmanship in 2004. The protection of the rights of persons belonging to different ethnic and religious groups is of primary importance for the government and is implemented on the basis of an intensive dialogue and involvement of the groups concerned and of other interested non-governmental partners. Moreover, it is for the first time in modern Bulgaria that the junior coalition partner in the government is the Movement for Rights and Freedoms – a party of the Bulgarian ethnic Turks, which has two Cabinet ministers and deputy ministers in all ministries. Focusing on the situation of Roma in Bulgaria, I will quote the results of the latest 2001 census, according to which the Roma population in Bulgaria numbers 365979 representing 4.6 % of the total population of the country. Most of the persons of Roma ethnic origin indicate Roma language as their mother tongue – 85.8 %, and the rest of them – Bulgarian and Turkish. Eastern Orthodox Christians are a majority among the Bulgarian Roma—55.2 %, while Muslims are slightly more than 26 %. Roma live in all parts of the country, but they are relatively densely concentrated in the districts of Sliven (13.5 %) and Montana (10.7 %). The legal framework created in Bulgaria after 1990 (the Bulgarian Constitution and respective laws and legal norms) fully guarantees to all Bulgarian citizens equality before the law and totally precludes any form of discrimination on grounds of race, nationality, ethnicity, sex, origin, religion, education, opinion, political affiliation, personal or social status or property status. According to the Constitution, the international instruments to which Bulgaria is a party, form part of the domestic legislation and have priority over those domestic provisions that might contravene them. Bulgaria has ratified all basic international instruments concerning the rights of persons belonging to minority groups, including the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. Moreover, the adoption of a comprehensive Anti-Discrimination Law is envisaged in the legislative program of the Government for the year 2002. A working group was set up in March 2002 to work on the draft.

It is an undeniable fact that Roma in Bulgaria, as other minority groups – ethnic Turks, Armenians, Jews, etc.—enjoy the same rights and freedoms as other Bulgarian citizens, including the right to freedom of association, the right to develop their own culture in accordance with their ethnic identity, etc. There are more than 300 Roma NGOs and associations officially registered in Bulgaria. These groups contribute to the integration and enhanced participation of Roma in social and political life and to the elaboration and implementation of programs and projects addressing their problems. There are 7 Roma political parties that participate in local and national elections. Members of Parlia-

ment of Roma origin have been elected to all National Assemblies since 1990 as representatives of various political parties. Exercising the right to receive and disseminate information in the Roma languages through electronic and printed media is an everyday reality in Bulgaria. In 2000 the first Roma private television operator was given a license in Vidin.

Having said that, let me assure you that the Government of Bulgaria fully recognizes the scope and the complexity of the problems faced by the Roma minority in our country as well as the fact that the progress in solving these problems in some areas by now has been far from satisfactory. Some of the problems are long-standing and rooted in history, while others have emerged with the radical changes that took place in Bulgaria after 1990. The Roma population is unfortunately among the most vulnerable social groups that have been most stricken by the hardships of economic transition. Poverty and unemployment have become a nation-wide problem, but it is the Roma communities and some other vulnerable groups that have been hit particularly hard by these phenomena. For example, if the average unemployment rate for the country ranges between 17 and 18 per cent, for the Roma population it amounts up to 70%. The high rate of unemployment of the Roma population is the result of a disparity between their labor skills and employers' high requirements under severe market conditions. The overwhelming part of Roma in Bulgaria have insufficient education, weak professional skills, poor discipline and low living standards. This places them in a non-competitive position on the labor market.

The Constitution guarantees the right of education in the mother tongue if other than Bulgarian, alongside official Bulgarian tuition. In the case of Roma, though, this right has not yet been adequately implemented despite the efforts made in the last decade. Some of the difficulties are related to the large variety of dialects spoken by Bulgarian Roma, the absence of textbooks and school aids. There is also a lack of trained teachers for the higher classes. The so called "segregated Roma schools" are also a de facto reality, though there is no legal ground whatsoever for the usage of the term "segregation." Concentrations of Roma children in district schools emerge as a result of territorial agglomerations of Roma population. According to available data on the educational level of Roma, 8 % of them are illiterate, 37 % percent finish fourth grade, 46 % have primary education, 8% finish secondary education, and less than 1 % higher education; over 50 % of Roma children of school age do not attend classes. The educational problems of Roma are due to a number of factors: among them are poor socio-economic conditions, low level of attendance of primary and secondary school, high percentage of drop-outs, as well as the vicious circle of Roma family—Roma school—Roma neighborhood, which does not facilitate their integration in the school system.

Specific Measures adopted by the Bulgarian Government—Establishment in December 1997 of a National Council on Ethnic and Demographic Issues—a consultative body at the Council of Ministers which is tasked to perform dialogue and coordination among the government institutions and non-governmental organizations aimed at formulating and implementing the national policy on ethnic issues. The Council includes representatives of State authorities and 34 ethnic minority NGOs, 21 of which represent Roma. The Council is chaired by a cabinet minister who is an ethnic Turk. Institutional and administrative strengthening of the Council started in October 2001 through a grant of

the World Bank. Experts on ethnic and demographic issues of Roma identity have been appointed to work in the state and local administrations, including the Council of Ministers, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry on Labor, the Ministry of Education. District Ethnic and Demographic Councils have been established in 25 of the 28 districts, with a structure similar to that of the National Council.

- In April 1999 the Council of Ministers adopted a Framework Program for Equal Integration of Roma in Bulgarian Society, elaborated with the active participation of Roma NGO's. Preventing discrimination against Roma was defined therein as a priority task. The adoption of the Program marked a serious political commitment by the Government to go further in adopting additional positive steps in a number of sensitive areas especially designed to ensure equality and opportunities for the persons of Roma origin. The Framework Program was highly evaluated by the Council of Europe and the OSCE. Financing of the Program is done through the state budget, the EU PHARE program, and the World Bank.
- Significant efforts have been made in the field of education. The Ministry of Education implements in cooperation with NGO's special programs and projects raising the educational and qualification level of the Roma population and promoting equal opportunities and equal access to education for Roma children. The successful implementation of such projects in several Bulgarian cities is an encouraging fact. The positive experience of integrated schools where Roma children learn together with their classmates of other ethnic identity must be supported and further expanded as conducive to long term solutions.
- In August 2000 a Commission on Human Rights was established within the National Police Service. Currently 92 Roma serve in the Bulgarian National Police Service.
- A Council on Roma Cultural Issues was established at the Ministry of Culture as a consultative body, which elaborated short-term strategy for the development of Roma culture. Roma Information and Culture centers were created in Sofia, Sliven, Plovdiv, Montana. The National Council on Radio and Television licensed a Roma TV station in Vidin in 2000.
- The Ministry of Labor has also developed and implements special projects aimed at the reduction of the high unemployment rate among Roma.

Mr. Chairman, I believe the above facts demonstrate clearly that Roma issues are of utmost importance on the agenda of the Bulgarian Government, which cooperates closely with the NGO sector in the search of concrete solutions to them. Bulgaria is firmly convinced that its model of interethnic peace and cooperation serves as a stabilizing factor in Southeast Europe and a positive example for integrating diversity and building tolerant relations between the majority and minority groups within a country. It is clear that solutions to many of the above mentioned long-standing problems cannot be quick and easy. Finding the adequate approach and solutions to them is a complex, costly and a time-taking task which requires patience and perseverance. This is why Bulgaria is fully open to active international cooperation in this field on a bilateral basis, through the NGO's network or through competent international bodies, such as the EU, the OSCE and the Council of

Europe. We would welcome increased US support and material and financial assistance in improving further the social status and civic integration of Bulgarian Roma. Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

In conclusion, I would like to convey to you my most important message. And it is particularly relevant on this day of April 9. Bulgaria has been traditionally a land of ethnic tolerance. The Bulgarians have never experienced ethnic hatred. These days the Bulgarian nation is being commended as a role model in the years of the Holocaust—when the Bulgarian Parliament, the Bulgarian King Boris III, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the Bulgarian people rescued their 50 000 Jews (the largest rescue in the Holocaust!!). They did not let a single Bulgarian Jew to be deported to the gas chambers of Nazi Germany. This dramatic historic legacy has far from been wasted. Moreover, we realize we must live up to it and keep up the respect for human life and human dignity.

Thank you for your attention.

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