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The Decade of Roma Rights

Interview with Nicolae Gheorghe¹, August 2006

ERRC: *You have been in charge at the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) 's Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues (CPRSI) for seven years. Your mandate has come to the end. How do you evaluate your actions in the last decade and what do you think your office has added to the course of the Roma rights movement?*

Nicolae Gheorghe: Well, currently I am in a self-critical mood while I try to collect the memories of the work I have done in the ODIHR CPRSI since 1999 and in the OSCE since 1990. Let's say that one of my first steps when employed by the ODIHR, in 1999, was to support the International Romani Union (IRU) and the Roma National Congress (RNC), which were the most visible organizations but, at that time, were somehow weak in their self-organization and in advocating for Roma rights. I provided them with the ODIHR's political and financial support and I managed to bring them to dialogue. In 2000, we established the International Roma Contact Group, which included the leadership of IRU, the board of RNC, and a couple of independent Roma activists and experts. This structure worked rather well for about one and a half years. The first discussions in August 2001 between the Finnish diplomacy and the Roma representatives, about the creation of a pan-European Roma body, were facilitated by this Roma Contact Group. The conjunction between the Finnish diplomacy, the institutional mechanisms of the Council of Europe

and the group of Roma representatives led to the establishment of the European Roma and Traveller Forum (ERTF), in 2003-2005. This brought the Romani movement to a different stage. And I look at this as an achievement.

There is also the ODIHR contribution to the negotiation of the OSCE Action Plan for Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti within the OSCE Area, adopted by the OSCE Ministerial Council in December 2003. It is a complex document, too comprehensive I may say, focused on the pledge of the participating states to "eradicate the discrimination" against the Roma and Sinti and to implement effective policies "for Roma, with Roma". For sure, not enough results can be reported after almost three years since its adoption; there are too many words in this Plan (out of its ten chapters and 6,030 words) which are poorly or not at all matched by the actions recommended to the participating states or/and tasked to the OSCE institutions. Some senior diplomats have said that the OSCE Action Plan is a "living document", susceptible to be altered (eventually by shortening and better focusing its wording), strengthened, better matched by institutional and financial tools, better staffed, etc. We will review the implementation of the OSCE Action Plan during the forthcoming OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM), Warsaw, 2-13 October, more precisely in the Working session on 11 October. I hope to have the ERRC as a participant and as a contributor to this debate and to hear, again, your informed criticism of particular participating states as well as of the strengths and weaknesses of

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the OSCE institutions' current actions for the Roma and Sinti.

ERRC: *Five years ago, in an interview with the ERRC, you urged for a democratically elected constituent assembly of Roma at the pan-European level. Is the ERTF something you wanted? Has it met your expectations? What do you hope the Forum will be able to achieve that previous initiatives could not?*

N.G.: I think that it is too early to evaluate the merits of the Forum, and we still have to maintain both supportive and friendly critical approaches. As I mentioned, I was part of creating the Forum, and I was actively involved in the discussions until mid-2003, when I took a little bit of distance. I believe that the Forum is the best arrangement that we could achieve for the time being in the process of the Roma self-organisation. But this is exactly the problem: the current Forum is an "arrangement" and not yet an elected body. It is created by consensus after taking into account the realities of different structures and stages of Romani organisations Europe-wide and in the represented countries. In some countries, Romani organisations are mature, whereas in some others, they are still embryonic. In the future, the Forum will have to reach a higher level of democracy in electing the national delegates through transparent democratic rules, based on which the European elections can be organized. In 2008/2009 there will be new elections for the Forum. Constituent delegations have to take steps in advance to better prepare for the elections of national representatives.

My first hope from the Forum is that it will manage to create standards, precedents for the national Roma organisations, with its actions and that it will serve as a role model. My second hope is that the Forum will create a vision for addressing the various issues that Roma are confronted with. For instance, it might take a stand on issues and dilemmas such as assimilation, integration, cultural separation. Or it might form an opinion on whether we should advocate for general human and citizenship rights being applied in a non-discriminatory way for Roma, or do we need a stronger mi-

nority status in each particular state, or should we have something trans-national, like the *European Roma Rights Charter* that the Roma National Congress has proposed in the mid-1990s. The Forum should also voice an opinion about the Kosovo Roma during the talks on the political status of Kosovo and use its credibility, its mandate and legitimacy to express a clear vision about what should be done for Roma – in Kosovo, in Serbia or in other countries where they have fled and are being expelled as refugees and IDPs – and how these measures should be put into effect.

ERRC: *As regards Kosovo, do you think that there is solidarity among Roma with the Roma from Kosovo? Do Roma mobilize themselves and act with a common voice when the fundamental rights of a larger Romani group are seriously violated?*

N.G.: Unfortunately, I have to say that I am amazed about the lack of sufficient solidarity between Roma from different countries. But I also have to mention positive developments, for example when Martin Demirovsky, as assistant to the Member of the European Parliament Els de Groen, organized a debate on the situation of Roma in Kosovo in the European Parliament on 6 March 2006. The ODIHR Contact Point managed to bring the discussions further and hold a debate in Skopje on 26 March and in Vienna during 29 March-1 April. In these discussions participated, or let me rather say, they were attended by a large number of Roma from Kosovo and by the representatives of the European Roma and Travellers Forum, although they were not ultimately very productive. Compared to the gravity and the urgency of the Kosovo issue, we are still quite slow and low profile, so I have to say that most Roma are more concerned with their immediate needs and with their own families and are not in solidarity with the most vulnerable Roma groups.

ERRC: *Five years ago, you said that Romani politics was in crisis, as "the bright ones are drawn into work in NGOs", and you called for a re-launching of Romani politics. Has the situation changed, are there more Roma involved*

in politics? Are there more professional Romani administrators – officers and experts – in ministries and governmental offices?

N.G.: Yes. There is a slow but constant increase in the number of the Roma elected in the local and national parliaments of some countries, such as Bulgaria, Hungary, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Slovakia and Romania. But Roma continue to be underrepresented on the voters' lists and in the elected offices, compared to their number and visibility in the public debates of many states throughout Europe. In what concerns the governmental and administrative offices, yes, I see also some modest developments. See Klara Orgovanova as the Plenipotentiary of the Commission for Roma Affairs in Slovakia, where there are already 30 staff members hired, not only in Bratislava but in the regional offices as well. In Romania, there is the National Agency for Roma, where 40-60 people will be hired by Maria Ionescu, State Secretary, who came from the NGO world. Currently, many young people work in the administration of Roma policies, like Gábor Daróczi in Hungary, who is the Ministerial Commissioner for Roma and Disadvantaged Children in the Ministry of Education and Culture, or Andor Ürmös, who leads a Roma Integration Department in the Hungarian Ministry of Social and Labor Affairs and I could mention other examples. But I don't see enough similar development in other countries, for instance in Bulgaria or in some "old member countries" of the EU (Finland is an exception), although there is a large number of educated Roma, probably because they are still more interested in the NGO work. So, I see some positive changes, although of course I would be happier to see thousands of Roma in governments and involved in politics, but this could sound like a Maoist revolution's slogan. My hope is that the Decade of Roma Inclusion will manage to generate awareness among the Roma NGOs so that they can move into key and influential positions in the public administration in the field of education, housing, health care, employment, etc.

ERRC: *When we talk about Romani politics, can you see political philosophies and ideologies behind Romani parties and political groups?*

N.G.: I think we are still in a premature phase as regards the political philosophies and ideologies elaborated by Roma for Roma. What I see is that some main leading political parties opened their doors to Romani politicians. See for example the Alliance of Young Democrats (FIDESZ) or the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ) parties in Hungary, which provided seats for two Romani women – Lívía Járóka and Viktória Mohácsi – in the European Parliament. So Romani people join mainstream parties more frequently instead of creating one on their own. Romania is another example, where the Romani party decided to join the Social Democratic Party in the 2000 and in the 2004 elections, without elaborating a coherent social democratic platform, so it was rather a personal coalition by political arrangement. These are stages in a process of political confrontations and clarifications. Roma are still taking a rather comfortable approach to politics, and this is a criticism not only to my generation but also to the next generation as well. International organizations, like the Council of Europe, European Parliament, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, invite Roma participants to their meetings usually to draft texts – or rather to comment/revise already-drafted texts – where we frequently behave in a "take-it-easy" way and do not use these occasions for political debates and confrontation. We still tend to believe that rights are granted somehow mechanically by laws and policy documents. After 15-20 years of such "resolution-driven" Romani activism, we could learn that the adoption of such documents, while useful, is far from being enough; neither is the "small-projects driven" approach successful enough. In this context, I have to acknowledge my whole responsibility for keeping myself and others in the "trap" of these approaches, in the limbo of the gap between the illusions of the activists and the realities of the every day life of the grass-roots people (by the way

of “illusions and realities”, this was also the title of an international Roma meeting in Snagov-Bucuresti, May 1993, organized by the Project on Ethnic Relations).

The lack of confrontation is also due to the fact that we who are educated and took the responsibility to portray ourselves as leaders – in the sense of influencing perceptions of Roma and about Roma – are clients or employees of foundations and international organizations, sometimes beneficiaries of affirmative action policies, so we are not political fighters. I see a clear need for confrontation among ourselves and I think we are not urging such possibilities enough.

ERRC: *There are a lot of expectations of the Decade of Roma Inclusion, 2005-2015. Do you think that there is real inclusion of Roma in the decade activities and decision-making? What can be the indicators of success of the Decade?*

N.G.: We are still at the very beginning of the Decade and I hope that this political initiative will be what it was announced to be: putting rights into practice in given countries. An indicator of success is to have more Roma involved in governments and in the administration or in policy-making bodies which are supposed to implement the provisions of the Decade and make policies in housing, education, employment and health care. But there is very little progress in that direction yet, except the launch of the Roma Education Fund, which I find great. I think that there was a misperception of the Decade: people in the governments, including some of those prime ministers or deputies who signed the declaration, took the Decade as a philanthropic initiative. They think that the World Bank and the Open Society Institute give money to the governments to implement projects at the national level, but this is a distorted interpretation. The message in my understanding was different: the government of each country has to find financial resources for the aims of the Decade, and then derive support from the outside world. That is why another indicator to assess the success of the Decade is the amount of funding for

Roma programs allocated from the budgets of relevant line ministries (Housing, Education, etc.) and the municipalities with Roma populations, as approved (voted) by the national parliaments and by the regional/local authorities of the countries involved in the Decade’s action plans. And I have to say that neither the governmental officers nor the experts and Roma activists associated with the Decade have done enough to implement this spirit and this indicator of Roma inclusion. Otherwise, I do not see yet a difference being made by the Decade *per se*.

ERRC: *Whereas Roma-related topics seem to appear regularly in the political discussion in the Decade countries, many Western countries, the Russian Federation and other countries in the former Soviet Union ignore Roma rights issues. Why is this so?*

N.G.: In international politics, you always have fashionable items that occupy the attention of politicians and appear regularly in the international and national media. If you want to maintain the Roma issue, you have to fight for that. There was a little bit of awareness in the Western-European countries before the accession of the new European Union countries, which were ringing the issues of Roma. But then, interest vanished after the accession took place. It is true that, for some real or maybe artificial reasons, the issue of Muslims in Western countries is much more in focus. But we have to clarify that it is not about Muslims as such, as religious and cultural groups in the respective countries, but about violent militancy and about the political ideologies behind those destructive actions. It is not comparable with the Roma issues, which involve discrimination, racism or poverty.

After the riots in Paris suburban neighbourhoods, last autumn, I heard opinions that the situation of Roma in Europe (in particular in some central and southern countries) is similar to the situation of young Muslims in EU countries. Indeed, both Roma and Muslims of Europe are confronted with similar challenges generated by racism, discrimination, social

exclusion and in some cases, poverty. There are commonalities which deserve to be better analyzed, and there is room for more intense coalition building among groups and associations fighting the same or/and similar effects rooted in racism and exclusion.

There are also differences among these very same groups, and one basic one, in my opinion, is that Roma of Europe have been settled in many countries as sedentary populations for centuries, being a *de facto* constituent population of the respective states. While the groups of Muslims – that we talk about in the present day’s media – are issued from more recent, post – Second World War migration. (There are differences among Muslim groups themselves in this respect, but we can not enter in details here). I recall here, for example, the position of the Zentralrat Deutscher Sinti und Roma which insists that the Sinti and Roma are a “Deutschevolksgruppe”, a German population, in the historic, legal and political meanings of the concepts related to “nationality” in German society. Also, the Sinti and Roma have been explicitly targeted for persecution on racist grounds by the German Nazis and the nationalist regimes of many of the European states during the Second World War. By the way, this is one of the reasons why we speak in the OSCE documents, institutions and events about the Roma *and Sinti*.

These historic and political differences generate lessons for the type of policies recommended to the states to adopt when dealing with the particularized tools of action aiming to curb racism and to eradicate discrimination faced by various particular groups within the common racism and anti-discrimination legal and institutional framework of given states.

In this respect, I may say that the state policies addressing the racism against the Roma are not as clear and as strong as the ones which address other types of racism against groups of the population experiencing both cultural distinctiveness and social exclusion, including the Muslims of Europe. Take the case of France: while the French state accepts some forms

of “positive discrimination” for the French Muslims (for example, there is a member of French government in charge of the issues of this population), there is not yet a clear and public recognition by the French authorities of a political status for the Roma of France – there is only the administrative category of the *gens du voyage*, which is a rough equivalent of the English Travellers – although France is a sponsor, together with Finland, of the initiative for the European Roma and Travellers Forum within the Council of Europe.

I thank you for this question giving me the chance to speak about Muslim populations, religion and cultures. I would like to point out here that a large segment of the Roma population in the world is Muslim, mainly in the Balkans and in the Middle East, but also among the Roma Diaspora in EU countries and in the Americas. We can hardly discuss the prospects of the Roma in post-crises situations without taking into account the church affiliation and the religious beliefs of particular Roma groups; this is the case, for example, of the Muslim Roma groups and persons who live among Christian populations (the Christians as various denominations) as majority or minority populations in various countries, regions, cantons or enclaves of the current Balkans.

ERRC: *Concerning the Romani movement, you said once that “this is not a movement, it is a sect”. What did you mean by that?*

N.G.: It is a way of inciting a debate with my fellow activists using meanings borrowed from the sociological analysis of the “sects” and “churches”. An established church is a mass organization which has hundreds of thousands or millions of followers. The sect is a small group which goes after the fundamental beliefs of a religion in a sort of break-away from an established church. Do not forget that Christianity first appeared as a sect among the Jewish ideas and beliefs too. All sects start with a few people only, organized usually around a charismatic leader, and grow bigger through supporters who make such initiatives become a church. In the case of the established churches, you have

enduring beliefs, passed through generations, large meetings and pilgrimages; there are also codified rules and church courts to enforce such rules. There is an institutional structure where you have church boards, administrators and a hierarchical leadership, just like in the context of Catholics: priests, bishops and the pope. In a sect, there is a strong and exclusive control over the people who join, as it is a small group. In a church (like in a business or in a public corporation of the present day), you have to cope with diverse personalities: there are idealists, opportunists, good and bad guys, genuine believers and hypocrites, and the leaders have to find solutions for all these characters and overcome the endless challenges of keeping them together. Think about how the pope deals with homosexual priests for example. The church cannot just expel them, but it has to accommodate what is controversial. A church is an institution which has to attract, include and keep a large constituency of believers; and this is the very reason they incite the breakaway of charismatic leaders who establish their sects in order to recall the original, “incorrupt”, “true credo” of the founding beliefs. If successful, a sect is an early stage of a church; alternatively, its challenge could be accepted and “absorbed” by the establishment of the mainstream church which may react by implementing the change brought to the front stage by the sectarian dissidence.

Mutatis mutandis this is the way I understand the breakaway of Rudko Kawczynski with his followers from the International Romani Union (IRU)’s establishment, in the mid-1980s. Rudko openly confronted the IRU leadership during the IVth International Roma Congress in Serock-Warsaw in May 1990; and he initiated the Roma National Congress (RNC) in autumn, the same year. It was, somehow, like a “sectarian” departure of the RNC group from an ailing IRU of those times. The RNC “radical” discourse and actions (street protests and sit-ins, like those organized with the Roma asylum-seekers in Germany) served, during the 1990s, as reminders of the original rights-oriented, militant agenda of the Romani self-organization, as illustrated by the spirit and the “manifesto” of the First World Romani

Congress in London, in April 1971. The provocation launched by the RNC (whose merit, among others, was to remain a rather small-scale but well-articulated body of committed activists, devoted to their leader) has been a catalyser for political in-fighting, for partisan realignments of various national organizations and for their renewed activism in the 1990s and into the new millennium, including the efforts to politically reform and revitalize the IRU. See, for example, the complex, even complicated, re-organisation of the IRU leadership during the Congress in Prague, June 2000; or the *Declaration of a Nation*; or the renewed political symbolism of the Roma flag, anthem and of the Romani language launched by that Prague meeting and by the IRU Congress in Lanciano (Italy) in October 2004. All these reforms aimed to reach the souls of millions of Roma world-wide. The dissidence of the RNC (as well as the less vocal but effective criticism expressed by the Scandinavian Roma, in particular by the late Aleka Stobin and by Miranda Voulasranta, following the IRU Prague meeting) has been also productive in stimulating the successive series of compromises among various factions of the Roma structures, such as the above mentioned ODIHR CPRSI-brokered International Roma Contact Group, which led to the recent establishment of the European Roma and Travellers Forum (ERTF) as a more inclusive organizational framework for both the IRU and RNC, as well as for other international networks (International Roma Women Network, Forum of European Roma Young People, Gypsies and Travellers International Evangelical Fellowship), for national Roma political parties and NGOs, etc. It remains to be seen if the ERTF is able to promote organisational growth and change by its own dynamic within the established institutional frameworks (including those provided by the Council of Europe) or, alternatively, if the need for political creativity and effectiveness will require a new challenger, or “dissenting”, break away political grouping.

Coming back to your questions pointing to the current Roma politics of self-organization, I may say that Romani organisations

are (*mutatis mutandis*, I repeat) rather like “sects”, not “churches”, not yet part of a social, mass movement. We don’t have enough followers because the discussion about Roma issues takes place among ourselves, Roma activists, and to tell you frankly, I see a serious, even widening disconnection between us, the “clubs” of Romani (national and international) political elite and the Romani communities in each country and in the world Romani Diaspora. It is a reminder that we may generate a movement only if we manage to find ideological tools and messages to capture the feelings, the interests and the social imagination of the population in the grass-roots Roma communities or/and in the general public (as, for example, various groups of mainstream human rights activists).

Said another way, I don’t think we are at the stage to call the current course a “Romani movement”. We are not there yet, because we are still capsulated in our small NGOs (sometimes rather exclusivist, rigid and intolerant among ourselves); in our families; in clan-based political parties (with modest electoral success); in Roma-labelled governmental offices (with minuscule budgets); or in our email-groups (frequently jammed by real or alleged technical inconveniences). We have to focus and upgrade the effectiveness of fighting the racism and discrimination against Roma Europe-wide; but we also have to discuss several sensitive issues like the inequality of women with men in Roma affairs, early marriages in some traditional groups, use and misuse of child labor by some families, freedom of sexual orientation in contemporary societies, etc. Talking about how to keep the Roma identity: what are the enduring “markers” of our ethnicity and what should be changed if we wish to achieve wider political mobilisation? Or, what is the impact of the religious/spiritual leaders on particular Roma groups; why and how are they more “successful” than the Roma political leaders or civil rights activists? Some people have to take the responsibility to discuss such issues “*for Roma, with Roma, by Roma*” so that we can have a debate (including controversies), but also common points and agreed steps on how to move

the Romani self-organization to a next, more inclusive, more mature stage of the process – and how to reach and mobilize the Romani people, not only and not mainly the self-appointed representatives. And one more point, please: both “churches” and “sects” (or the “clubs”) can function properly only thanks to the financial contributions and donations from their own followers, especially from the rich ones!

ERRC: *You talked about representation of Roma in various bodies. How can you explain that international, intergovernmental organizations still lack Roma staff members? Who is responsible for that?*

N.G.: Well, this is a sensitive and painful issue. In our OSCE Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, after I had been hired – through an open competition and have not just been appointed as many believe – I recruited twice Romani colleagues. This generated complaints from some other competitors who perceived that they were disadvantaged by this decision. The difference at the Council of Europe or the European Commission is that they always recruit in open competition, as opposed to governmental bodies, where people are many times appointed based on their ethnic origin and/or political affiliation. So affirmative actions have to combine the main criteria for the job and the elements of policies related to sex, gender, ethnic origin, etc. If we talk about legitimacy of people in positions, I see sometimes contradictions between two dimensions: political legitimacy and competence. They both are needed for successful and legitimate work. The Council of Europe is currently recruiting officers for the secretariat of the ERTF; and the OSCE recruits staff on a continuing basis for the ODIHR CPRSI, for the Focal Points in the OSCE Field Missions and for the OSCE mainstream vacancies, many of them being relevant for the Roma and Sinti policies. From my modest experience in staff recruiting, I may say that the Roma and Sinti themselves, those individuals, women and men, with the required skills have to take the time to complete the application forms and the trouble of entering in competitions for given job vacancies. The success is not 100% assured, but

it is worth trying, and there is always someone who wins. Like in the Olympic Games: it is as important to participate in a sport competition as in dreaming to win it.

ERRC: *What are your plans for the future? Will you remain affiliated with the ODIHR office?*

N.G.: In the very near future, by the end of 2006, I have the task to assist the ODIHR in recruiting a new Senior Adviser on Roma and Sinti Issues and to “hand over” the work done in the ODIHR Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues (CPRSI). I hope that some of the projects started over the last years in the framework of the OSCE Action Plan for Roma and Sinti – such as the CPRSI projects on Police and

Roma; or on Roma in Kosovo and in other crises situations; or the participation of Roma in the elections in various countries; or upgrading Roma housing and settlements programs – will continue in the coming years. If my contribution will be considered valuable in some of these or other OSCE actions, I would be glad to volunteer it. On a more personal side, I and my family will return soon to Romania, where we hope to rejoin the NGO world. I dream to have the time and the curiosity to read some of the basic books in philosophy and sociology which I was supposed to study during my college years.

ERRC: Thank you for this interview, we wish you all the best.