

**ODIHR Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues - contribution to the UN Draft guidelines on the effective implementation of the right to participate in public affairs**

OSCE participating States have committed themselves to specific actions supporting the participation of Roma and Sinti in public and political life. The [2003 OSCE Action Plan on Roma and Sinti](http://www.osce.org/odihr/17554?download=true) (OSCE Action Plan) sets out the framework with a comprehensive plan focusing on commitments undertaken by the OSCE participating States as well as internal action within OSCE institutions on specific tasks to support participating States in improving the situation of Roma and Sinti, including their participation in public and political life.

The OSCE Action Plan gives ample attention to enhancing the participation of Roma and Sinti in public and political life.[[1]](#footnote-1) It calls on the participating States to proactively ensure the participation of Roma and Sinti by solving issues related to the lack of personal documents and by accounting to the principles of early involvement, inclusiveness, transparency, meaningful participation at all levels of government and ownership“for ensuring effective participation of Roma and Sinti in public and political life.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

With regard to the specific situation of Roma and Sinti women, participating States underlined that “women should be able to participate on an equal basis with men in consultative and other mechanisms designed to increase access to all areas of public and political life.”[[3]](#footnote-3) The participating States should also guarantee women’s equal rights when it comes to voting, including a ban on “family voting”.[[4]](#footnote-4) Along these lines, improving the situation of Roma and Sinti youth is also fully grounded in OSCE’s commitments under the OSCE Action Plan, and the 2013 [Ministerial Council Decision 4/13](https://www.osce.org/mc/109340?download=true) that has a particular focus on Roma and Sinti women, youth and children.

Furthermore, the OSCE Action Plan tasks ODIHR as well as other OSCE institutions and structures, to design programmes that encourage Roma and Sinti representatives to stand as candidates for elected bodies, or to identify creative solutions that would ensure the participation of Roma and Sinti representatives in national and local decision-making processes.[[5]](#footnote-5) The OSCE Action Plan also calls on ODIHR and, where appropriate, other OSCE institutions and structures, to develop and implement voter education and voter registration programmes,[[6]](#footnote-6) and further specifies that ODIHR should “continue and strengthen the practice of examining the involvement of Roma people in voting and election processes.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

The OSCE Action Plan’s provisions on the participation in public affairs of Roma and Sinti were reinforced with two additional Ministerial Council Decisions relating to Roma and Sinti. In 2008, the Ministerial Council Decision No. 6/08 on “Enhancing OSCE efforts to implement the OSCE Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti within the OSCE Area” encouraged the participating States to “promote effective participation by Roma and Sinti in public and political life.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Additionally, in 2013, the OSCE Ministerial Council adopted the Decision No. 4/13 focusing on “Enhancing OSCE efforts to implement the OSCE Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti within the OSCE Area, with a particular focus on Roma and Sinti women, youth and children.”[[9]](#footnote-9) With this decision, the participating States committed to “prevent further marginalization and exclusion of Roma and Sinti” by “enhancing the participation of Roma and Sinti in the elaboration, implementation and evaluation of the policies that affect them, including by fostering Roma and Sinti political participation and by supporting voter education among Roma and Sinti.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

Furthermore, participating States agreed to take active measures to support the empowerment of Roma and Sinti women by “promoting the effective and equal participation of Roma and Sinti women in public and political life, including through the promotion of women’s access to public office, public administration and decision making positions.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Furthermore, both the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly “Resolution on Promoting Policies in Favour of the Roma Population” and the “Resolution on Promoting Policies on Equality between Women and Men of the Roma Population”, adopted in 2011, ask OSCE participating States to provide more space for the increased public and political participation of Roma[[12]](#footnote-12) and to “promote equal opportunities for Roma women in politics”.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Nonetheless, Roma and Sinti participation has received significantly less consideration than other socio-economic challenges faced by Roma and Sinti communities in the last years, including by the international community. Effective participation is an essential prerequisite for successful policy implementation as well as addressing the needs and interests of Roma and Sinti communities, as it may contribute to enhancing ownership of the policies affecting them.

The ODIHR Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues includes participation of Roma and Sinti in its monitoring reports on the implementation of the OSCE Action Plan on Roma and Sinti. According to the *Status report 2013 - Implementation of the Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti Within the OSCE Area - Renewed Commitments, Continued Challenges*[[14]](#footnote-14)and subsequent report and information received, Roma and Sinti across the OSCE still face obstacles in exercising their voting rights for various reasons: due to lack of documents, not being enlisted in voter’s registries, manipulation through “controlled voting” or vote-buying, lack of voter education and illiteracy, lack of capacity of candidates to run for elected office, family voting or because of legal and administrative impediments.

Furthermore, the growing intensity of anti-Roma political rhetoric further affects the opportunities of Roma and Sinti, especially women and youth, to participate effectively. Public officials and mainstream political parties have also resorted to rhetoric against Roma immigrants. In the last years, ODIHR has continued to receive worrying reports indicating that politicians continue to scapegoat Roma and Sinti throughout the OSCE area, based on prejudicial sentiments in order to further their own personal political campaigns.

The findings of our 2013 Status report[[15]](#footnote-15) and other more recent reports demonstrate a reluctance of mainstream political parties to launch Roma and Sinti as candidates in spite of an increasing number of educated young Roma and Sinti. The Status report provides examples of low levels of political representation of Roma and Sinti in the OSCE area. At the same time, in some OSCE participating States, the representational gap has been addressed through legislation setting up systems of minority representation. For instance, in Hungary, Croatia and Slovenia such systems allow for preferential representation at the local level, with various degrees of competencies, yet the effectiveness of these models still needs to be assessed.

The Status report urges participating States to undertake concrete efforts to enhance the participation and representation of Roma and Sinti in political life: to protect and enhance the right of Roma and Sinti women and men to participate as voters and candidates in local and national elections; to address the on-going challenges that render Roma communities especially vulnerable to vote-buying and vote manipulation; to address the lack of capacity of Roma elected representatives at the national and local levels through targeted programmes; to enhance government consultation mechanisms, allowing for partnerships with Roma civil society organizations as a measure of good governance; and to provide specialized training to Roma working in public administration and on minority councils.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The 2014 Expert Meeting on Opportunities and Risks of Local-level Engagement[[17]](#footnote-17) helped to identify key challenges to meaningful participation of Roma and Sinti at local level. Among the identified challenges it was noted that Roma and Sinti have the highest voter turnouts during local elections because they see local authorities as important to their everyday lives. However, strong patronage politics and misuse of state resources by powerful local mayors pose a challenge in local politics. It was also noted that different strategies, including civil society activism and working with the next generation of leaders on alternatives to such corrupt cartels, are of crucial importance for ending such harmful practices.[[18]](#footnote-18)

The meeting also stressed that in order to enhance the effectiveness of Roma and Sinti political participation, action by all stakeholders, including the OSCE/ODIHR, is needed. Support for Roma and Sinti political leaders should be made available through evidence-based research and examples of good practices in political participation. A comprehensive study of good practices taking different strategies into consideration could allow for knowledge transfer. In particular, evidence of successful strategies used by other disenfranchised groups such as women and youth could be evaluated and adopted accordingly.[[19]](#footnote-19)

In 2018, on the occasion of the 15th anniversary of the adoption of the plan, ODIHR will publish its third status report on the implementation of the OSCE Action Plan, focusing on its Chapter VI on “Enhancing participation in public and political life.”

1. “OSCE Action Plan”, *op.cit.*, note 2, Chapter VI, Enhancing participation in public and political life. Paragraphs 87-106 provide specific recommendations to participating States and OSCE institutions and structures, respectively. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Ibid.*, Chapter VI, Enhancing participation in public and political life, Paragraph 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Ibid.*, paragraph 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Ibid.*, paragraph 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Ibid.*, Chapter VI, Enhancing participation in public and political life, Paragraph 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Ibid.*, Chapter VI, Enhancing participation in public and political life, Paragraph 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Ibid.*, paragraph 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. OSCE Ministerial Council, Decision No. 6/08, “Enhancing OSCE efforts to implement the Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma within the OSCE Area”, Helsinki, 5 December 2008, Paragraph 7, <http://www.osce.org/mc/35488>. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. OSCE Ministerial Council, Decision No. 4/13, “Enhancing OSCE efforts to implement the Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma within the OSCE Area, with a particular focus on Roma and Sinti women, youth and children”, Kyiv, 6 December 2013, <http://www.osce.org/mc/109340>. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Ibid.*, Article 2, Paragraph 2.7. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Ibid.,* Article 4, Paragraph 4.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, “Resolutions of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Adopted at the Twentieth Annual Session”, Resolution on Promoting Policies in Favour of the Roma Population, Belgrade, 6 to10 July 2011, Article 22, p. 46, available at:

<<https://www.oscepa.org/meetings/annual-sessions/belgrade-2011>>. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, “Resolutions of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Adopted at the Twentieth Annual Session”, Resolution on Promoting Policies on Equality between Women and Men of the Roma Population, Belgrade, 6 to 10 July 2011, Article 15, p. 48, available at: <<https://www.oscepa.org/meetings/annual-sessions/belgrade-2011>>. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. OSCE/ODIHR , “Status report 2013 - Implementation of the Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti Within the OSCE Area - Renewed Commitments, Continued Challenges”, Warsaw, 2013, <<https://www.osce.org/odihr/107406?download=true>> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Ibid.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. OSCE/ODIHR , “Roma and Sinti Political Participation: Opportunities and Risks of Local-level Engagement”, Warsaw, 2014, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/219511?download=true>. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., p.16. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., p.17. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)