

**APRIL ACTIVITY REPORT  
OF THE GHM ROMA OFFICE**

**Contents**

- 1. GHM on International Roma Day (8/4/00)**
- 2. The Greek government answers to Progressive Left Coalition MP, M. Damanaki**
- 3. GHM and Nikos Katsaris meet with the Ombudsman**
- 4. Housing projects underway**
- 5. A short visit to the Roma settlement of Sagaiika, Achaia**

**1. GHM on International Roma Day (8/4/00)**

Following GHM initiatives, Maria Damanaki --a Progressive Left Coalition MP, who is sensitive to Roma issues-- undertook the writing of an article on Greek and Kosovo Roma to be published on the eve of International Roma Day, April 7, 2000. Maria Damanaki has been one of the few MPs submitting questions that address the problems of the Roma before the Greek parliament. Last year M. Damanaki posed three such questions to the government. On April 8, 2000, GHM member, D. Gousetis, dedicated his weekly column in *Avgi* to Roma in Greece.

**7/4/2000:** *Avgi* [Progressive Left Coalition MP, M. Damanaki, on International Roma Day]

**The time of the Gypsies**

by Maria Damanaki (MP of the Progressive Left Coalition)

April 8, that is tomorrow, has been proclaimed by the OSCE as the International Day for the Roma (Gypsies). This is not without a reason. Ten years after the fall of the Berlin wall, discriminations and exclusions of Europe's ten million Roma are found in every aspect of daily life throughout its countries, in terms of education, unemployment, poverty, infant mortality and in recent years their personal safety which is at risk not only because of social racism, but also as a result of institutionalized state racism.

The great victims of the Kosovo crisis were the 100,000 Roma who lived there and were victimized by Milocevic's regime as well as by the UCK. Today, almost none of them are left in Kosovo. In our country, there live 300,000 Roma. The right to citizenship was granted to them by the Greek state only 25 years ago. Even when we decided that these fellow citizens are Greeks, we consciously let half of them live at the margin of our society, in shabby settlements, which we pretended to know nothing

about. State and social racism against them has preceded racism against Albanians. Last February, I tabled a parliamentary question concerning an operation of unprecedented violence by policemen and employees of the Aspropyrgos municipality, who destroyed and eventually burnt down the Roma settlement of Nea Zoe. Who has accounted for that?

The largest Roma settlement is found on the bed of river Gallikos. There, in the water when the river swells, and amid the mice that hang around when the waters are low, found shelter two years ago 2,000 Roma, who had been evicted from their camp in Evosmos, Salonica. At that time the government announced their transfer to the former military barrack of Gonou. The army was to give over the area in November 1998 and the state itself (Deputy Minister Mr. Kotsonis) had announced that the necessary relocation works would last for three months, that is to say the settlement would be ready by February last year. Today, seventeen months later, works are still in progress, which reminds us of the story of the Arta bridge [which was being put up only to go down the next day]... The budget for these works has been spent only by approximately 50%. There is no political will for these works to be completed. Last September, in response to a question I had tabled, Deputy Minister Mr. Florides declared that, for the year 1999, 800 million Drs. were being allocated to meet the needs of the Roma housing problem. In February, through another question, I asked for a spending report per individual operation. The report would list works that were completed as well as those that are still in progress. The response was a lengthy «Review for the years 1996-1999,» according to which the only thing that was completed in these four years was ... a survey of the housing needs of the Roma by DEPOS [state urban study authority].

The highest concentration of Roma, besides the one in Salonica perhaps, is found in Attica. In the «Review,» however, there is no mention of even one housing project for the Roma in Attica. Hardly any government official cared to visit the settlements and see the living conditions of the Roma. Now, during the pre-election period, everybody is eager to demonstrate their belated interest or to show off their unfinished or delayed work. In the light of the imminent elections, that is to say in an effort to hunt for votes, 940 loans have been announced for the housing of the Roma. The criteria for these loans are vague and the relevant decision has not been published in the Official Gazette. The obvious aim is to buy over the silence and the vote of certain people. According to the OSCE document, the purpose of the International Day is to lead to action that will contribute to the emancipation of the Roma, «amaro romano drom» («in their own romani way») as they say in their language. Their own way is the only road to their emancipation and for this they have had and will continue to have full-scale support from the Progressive Left Coalition.

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**8/4/2000: Avgi**

(column: Humans and Rights)

## **Gypsies Made the Nails International Roma Day**

by Dionyssi Gousetis (Vice-President of Greek Helsinki Monitor and Editor of Amnesty International - Greece's quarterly «Martyries» [Testimonies])

'Gypsies made the nails.' With this line -reference to Nazarene's crossing- composer Kostas Hatzis expressed his sarcasm, victim himself of the stereotype featuring Roma (Gypsies) as outcasts by choice, 'tradition' or even 'perverse nature' and not because they are victims of racism and social exclusion.

Today is the International Roma Day and tomorrow is the day of the elections. There could not be a better coincidence for Progressive Left Coalition party. The latter is the only political force standing by the Roma with respect to their cultural specificities and vision of the multicultural society. Its President **Nikos Konstandopoulos**, and **Maria Damanaki**, **Stella Alfieri**, **Spyros Danelis**, **Fotis Kouvelis**, **Mustafa Mustafa**, **Nitsa Loule** are Progressive Left Coalition MPs who brought Roma issues many times in the parliament, in the form of questions as well as proposals. In cooperation with the Doctors of the World-Greece, Greek Helsinki Monitor, Minority Rights Group-Greece and DROM Network for the Roma Social Rights, Progressive Left Coalition submitted a draft law proposal on self-managed settlements. In addition, together with the non-governmental organizations, Progressive Left Coalition MPs filed complaints against the competent authorities in Nea Zoe (Aspropyrgos) for the arson of Roma shucks and earlier against the Prefect of Thessaloniki for the evicted Roma of Evosmos. In yesterday's 'Avgi', in her article, Maria Damanaki set out the government's indifference and hypocrisy regarding Romas' housing. Nikos Konstandopoulos has personally supported the idea of self-managed settlements and during his many visits in camps he has expressed his solidarity towards the Roma: in the destitute camp in the river Gallikos, in Nea Alikarnasos (Crete) and elsewhere. In the river Gallikos he has even baptized a young boy, called Manolis.

All this action is being taken by Progressive Left Coalition, despite the existing stereotypes and in contrast with government policy and positions. Ethnocentric assimilation is the government's overall response to the racism of isolation. **Theodoros Pangalos** expressed this point rather clearly (daily 'Ta Nea' 31/1/00) when talking of remaining unassimilated populations in our country (Roma, Pontics, immigrants): *'Unassimilated groups and ghettos (...) are a time bomb for Greek society'*.

Even more clearly and with a supposed democratic cover, the same view was expressed by professor **A. Gotovos**, in charge of the University of Ioanina Education Program on Roma running for three years now under the auspices of the Ministry of Education. Mr. Gotovos, carrier of the governmental policy, twisted the meaning of the words by calling the proponents of multiculturalism 'ethnicists' and criticizing them for considering Roma a minority (he called them 'constructors of minorities'). *'In the name of respect of the difference, they legalize ghetto policies'* he said. According to Mr. Gotovos, ghetto policies consist of the teaching of Romanes and of the self-managed settlements, those *'peculiar, sophisticated ghettos'* in his own words.

Yet, four years ago, deputy Minister of Social Care, Mr. **Kotsonis**, had put on the table the use of Romanes. The General Secretariat of Popular Training included it in its programs, while the general director of the public radio ERA, **Y. Tzanetakos**, expressed the wish to add it in the list of emissions in foreign languages (in Bulgaria this was done already and in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia there exist even Romani TV stations). The nationalists in the Ministry of Education have turned things upside down. Contrary to what is being going on in Bulgaria and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (the latter having also quotas for Roma to enter universities or the administration), in Greece, Romanes has been completely left out of the education program. Self-managed settlements are under fire. How and why one part of the administration is turning against the other?

Government policy is not solely opposed to the stance of the non-governmental organizations and the Progressive Left Coalition. It is also against the OSCE which calls on the governments 'to preserve and develop the culture of Roma.' It is furthermore against the Council of Europe which considers Roma a national minority (as such recognized in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) and which 'denounces equally policies of discrimination as well as policies of assimilation'.

In a 'Doctors of the World' meeting, on January 15, Nikos Konstandopoulos, audaciously opposing pro-assimilation nationalists, raised his voice: *'the expression 'you are not a minority, you are like us', is an excuse for multiple discriminations at your expense (...) Romanies' recognition as a cultural minority is a civilized action; Roma are a minority in the cultural and sociological sense of the term'*. Progressive Left Coalition participates in the elections under the flag of multiculturalism, raised not belatedly and certainly not as a flag of convenience.

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## **2. The Greek Government answers to Progressive Left Coalition MP, M. Damanaki**

Following the September 1999 report to the OSCE on Roma in Greece, submitted by GHM and other non-governmental organizations and, subsequent GHM initiatives, on February 2000 Progressive Left Coalition MP, M. Damanaki, once more, brought up the issue of Roma housing in the Greek parliament. In her question towards the Ministry of Interior, M. Damanaki asked for a detailed account of government's action for Romas' housing and social rehabilitation, in respect to the examples of destitute camps mentioned in the report. The Greek deputy Minister of Interior, G. Florides, came up with a three years' [vague and general] account of work in the field of housing, education, employment and quality of life, dated since 1996, year of the announcement of government's policy framework for the improvement of Romas' living conditions. As M. Damanaki stated in her latest article on Roma (Avgi, 7/4/00) *"the response was a lengthy 'Review for the years 1996-1999', according to which the only thing that was completed was a survey of the housing needs of the Roma."* In reality, the response did not answer M. Damanaki's question. There were hardly any

references to the examples stated in the report to the OSCE, including well-known destitute camps in Athens: *‘The most numerous Roma gathering, besides the one in Salonica perhaps, is found in Attica. In the ‘Review’, however, there is no mention of even one housing operation for the Roma in Attica’* (Ibid.).

As stated in the answer, scheme implementation is left to the municipalities, while the Ministry of Interior evaluates the overall progress. The brand new inter-ministerial body --set up for the purposes of better coordination between local and national authorities in January 2000-- has so far accepted 27 project proposals from equal in number municipalities. Infrastructure works, long-term and short-term housing schemes have already been initiated in Salonica, Kalamata and Mesini (Peloponese), Sofades and Volos (Continental Greece), Didimotiho (Western Thrace), Seres (Aegean Macedonia), Nea Alikarnasos (Crete).

### **3. GHM and Nikos Katsaris meet with the Ombudsman**

On April 20, 2000, the Roma man Nikos Katsaris, together with GHM’s Christina Rougheri, met with G. Kaminis and A. Takis from the Ombudsman’s Office. Kaminis and Takis are handling Nikos Katsaris’ case, which alleges maltreatment by police officers in Nafplio in fall 1999. In order to proceed with the case the Ombudsman’s Office demanded a factual report from Nikos Katsaris and posed supplementary questions. The latter presented his story once again. Kaminis and Takis were very interested in finding out whether the police had come to the scene especially for the Roma, or had found them by pure chance. (In case they were suspects, the officers could claim that there were legitimate reasons for stopping the Roma at a gunpoint). Nikos Katsaris’ answers did not help clear the air in this respect. In addition, both Mr. Kaminis and Mr. Takis expressed an interest in proceeding with the case, despite the absence of witnesses other than the officers involved and the Roma.

On behalf of GHM several things were made clear:

Dimitris Angelides from GHM --the person whom Nikos Katsaris contacted while in detention-- said that he was ready to testify under oath the content of his conversation with the officer in charge at the time. The officer had more or less admitted that the incident happened, stating that “these things happen sometimes.”

If the case was about Nikos Katsaris and his relatives resisting police inspection --as claimed by the competent police directorate in its first answer to the Ombudsman-- why were not they prosecuted for resistance to authority? Similarly, why were not they prosecuted for robbery or attempted robbery? Belated accusations of this kind raise questions about the sincerity and seriousness with which the police handled the case.

In the presence of Mr. Kaminis and Mr. Takis, Christina Rougheri showed Nikos Katsaris the document informing detainees on their rights, which the Greek delegation to the UN had proudly presented beforehand. Neither Nikos Katsaris, nor his relatives were ever given such a document. As GHM confirmed to the Ombudsman’s Office, the existence of this valuable document is unknown even to lawyers visiting detainees in the General Police Directorate of Athens.

#### **4. Housing projects underway**

Thanasis Triarides, spokesperson of the DROM Network for Roma Social Rights, informed GHM that so far 65 prefabricated houses had been transferred to the former military barracks of Gonou and that the infrastructure works for water and electricity supply were completed. Yet, following the parliamentary elections of April 9, the works on Greece's first self-managed Roma settlement were suddenly stopped. The camp seemed to have played its part in the governmental pre-election propaganda. Reportedly, the Minister of Defense, A. Tsohatzopoulos, elected in the district of Thessaloniki, made an appearance for the local media at the barracks of Gonou a few days before the elections. The new deadline for the transfer of the Roma to the settlement has been shifted to June 2000.

GHM also contacted Mr. F. Stamos from the Prime Minister's Office for Quality of Life. The latter gave the organization some background information regarding the latest decision of the government to give loans with favorable conditions to 940 Roma families. This initiative was started after the Office contacted municipalities willing to proceed with Roma housing rehabilitation. Having the experience of similar initiatives for ethnic Greeks from the former Soviet Union, the government announced this specific number of beneficiaries in order to supervise adequately the project's implementation.

#### **5. A short visit to Sagaiika, Achaia**

On 26 April, a GHM/MRG-G team (Panayote Dimitras and Nafsika Papanikolatos) visited the Roma settlement in Sagaiika, Achaia (near Patras) and reported that the inadequate living conditions first registered in 1998 had remained unaltered.