

**FEBRUARY 1999 ACTIVITY REPORT  
OF THE GHM ROMA OFFICE**

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**1. Follow-up on the case of the racist reporter in Korinthos (Peloponese)**

Following contacts with non-governmental organizations and the lawyer Yana Kourtovik, the Greek Helsinki Monitor (GHM) decided to look into the possibility of Roma taking legal action against the newspaper. The GHM board member Dionysis Gousetis referred to these reports in the Athenian paper *Avgi*, making them known to a larger group of people. At the same time, the reports were sent to Nikos Katsaris and Stelios Kalamiotis - both of them active members of the Chalandri Roma Association "Elpida" [Hope]. The GHM informed also the Prefecture of Korinthos Youth Council (the only local citizens' association, which reacted against the reports in question), Doctors of the World-Greece and DROM Network for Roma Social Rights. After the initial exchange of views and opinions, the GHM decided to make the incident known also to the Panhellenic Federation of Greek Roma Associations, the General Secretariat of Popular Training, the General Secretariat of Intercultural Education of the Ministry of Education and the Prime Minister's Office for Quality of Life. In a two-page letter, the GHM presented the reports and their initial source -the extreme right paper *Chrysi Avgi*- as well as the action already taken by the organization. The GHM decided not to get involved in any legal proceedings related to the case, giving the opportunity to the Roma Federation to act accordingly.

(Excerpt from GHM February 2000 Press Report to the ERRC):

**3. «Let's talk about... Gypsies» - D. Gousetis (GHM) on racist comments against Roma in a provincial newspaper**

5/2/2000 *Avgi* [D. Gousetis]

[http://www.avgi.org/cgi-bin/hweb.exe?-A=137493&-w=20000205\\_&-V=AVGI&-P](http://www.avgi.org/cgi-bin/hweb.exe?-A=137493&-w=20000205_&-V=AVGI&-P)

«Let's Talk about Gypsies»

Roma, as most of them in Europe identify themselves --known also under the pejorative term Tsiganes and Gypsies-- are often seen as a nomad and marginalized population due to... habit or customary practice. Only few of us detect the states'

responsibility for this marginalization, which derives from Romas' exclusion from all of the important fields of life (social, political, and economic). The fall of Communism contributed even more to the overall deterioration of their status in Europe. In Greece, when it comes to Roma, one can discern two different approaches: the assimilationist and the multiculturalist one. While the first approach aims at the 'annihilation' of Roma's language and customs, the second approach supports a model of coexistence, mutual acceptance and tolerance of the differences. In this field, Roma are supposed to have their own space.

There is also another approach - the racist one. That is the approach of Mr. Spyros Pantazis, columnist in the provincial newspaper *Proini* ['Morning Paper']. This newspaper claims to be a mainstream local paper published in Korinthos (Peloponese). The columnist in question dedicated two subsequent articles (15&16/12/1999) with expressions of his [racist] view on the Roma. Roma camps are drug-dealing centers; Roma are characterized as people leading parasitic lives... Both articles were exact copies of a November 1999 report in *Chrysi Avgi*, the paper of the extreme rightists in Greece. The *Chrysi Avgi* report was not signed. Whether Mr. Pantazis wrote the article, or just copied it, makes no real difference as he publicly endorsed such racist views. The real issue is the paper itself. The publisher Ms. Kasimatis did not bother replying to the [only!] letter of protest from the Prefecture of Korinthos Youth Council. If Ms. Kasimatis' paper targets the same audience as that of *Chrysi Avgi*, that's fine. If not, she should detach herself and her paper from Mr. Pantazis and his views as soon as possible.

*A very positive report, bringing into the light two of the prevailing approaches on managing inter-ethnic relations in Greece: assimilationism and multiculturalism. In addition, the report highlights the lack of sensitivity in Greek society. Tolerance for racist views, expressed in a mainstream newspaper, seems to derive not from the 'tolerance for intolerance' principle, but from a culture of public indifference towards anything deviating from the majority's sometimes authoritarian perception of the norm.*

## **2. Second parliamentary question of Maria Damanakis (Progressive Left Coalition MP), following the September 1999 NGO report to the OSCE**

### **Question to the Ministry of the Interior, Public Administration and Decentralization**

**2/2/2000**

In my previous question (No. 1649-7/9/1999), I asked you about your actions as regards the need for improvement of the living conditions of Greek Roma, which was addressed at length in a joint report to the OCSE of a number of non-governmental organizations. You replied that the amount of 800 million drachmas has been allocated to the whole country for the year 1999. This money is meant to address the problems of housing and living conditions of the Roma. In the same answer, it was stated that the Ministry of the Interior, Public Administration and Decentralization is cooperating with «ROM Network», the Panhellenic Federation of Greek Roma Associations and others in a program for the eradication of the problem.

At the same time, I would like to stress that the Greek delegation to the OSCE admitted that improvement is taking place with a pace much slower than desired. The other factors singled out as contributing to the bad situation were the bureaucratic sluggishness, the lack of consent among the Roma “who do not easily speak with one voice” and the general prejudice of the Greek public. Keeping all this in mind, I would like to ask the Minister of the Interior, Public Administration and Decentralization:

- 1. Which areas and settlements, mentioned in the NGOs’ report to the OSCE Review Meeting, have received money from the government and how much money was given in every case?**
- 2. What work has been carried out in each case and what has been the progress so far?**
- 3. What is the government’s plan of action for the near future in each of the settlements mentioned in the report and especially in the region of Rio?**

The deputy asking the question

**Maria Damanakis**

The question was prepared by the GHM and forwarded to the Progressive Left Coalition MP, in order to urge the government to make specific commitments before the Greek parliament regarding the issue of Roma housing.

### **3. Police Directorate of Argolida in response to Nikos Katsaris**

The November 2, 1999 complaint to the Ombudsman by Nikos Katsaris --in which he denounced the maltreatment he got from police officers in Nafplio (Peloponese) on September 12, 1999-- were denied by the Police Directorate of Argolida. The Police Directorate claimed that their investigation, provoked by the report, had proven that the accusations were unfounded. The police also stated that Nikos Katsaris and his relatives opposed the investigation, and acted impudently when approached by the officers in question. Moreover, the motives of Nikos Katsaris and the others were questioned, since they had brought their case into the light with a certain delay. To emphasize on this, the police made the following point: N. Katsaris did not ask for a lawyer while in custody and did not file a complaint when it was still possible for evidence of the alleged brutality to be produced. Finally, in the reply it was stressed that, following the investigation, it turned out that two of the four arrested persons had pending warrants against them. The answer of the Police Directorate of Argolida was primarily addressed to the three non-governmental organizations, which presented Nikos Katsaris’ denunciations – the Greek Helsinki Monitor, Minority Rights Group-Greece and DROM Network for Roma Social Rights.

In their counter-response to the Police Directorate of Argolida, Nikos Katsaris and the aforementioned non-governmental organizations argued that, Mr. Katsaris had unsuccessfully attempted to get in touch with the Athens-based lawyer Katia Hadjidimitriou, while he was still in custody. While in custody, with the right to make a very limited number of phone calls, Nikos Katsaris contacted the Greek Helsinki Monitor and asked for help. On the following day, he and his father were set free after a lawyer’s intervention. Taking into account Nikos Katsaris’ limited resources, lack of

experience and ignorance of the procedures, it is clear that Mr. Katsaris did his best to defend his rights and dignity. Kicks and punches usually do not leave signs of torture. This does not mean that maltreatment never happened. In any case, Nikos Katsaris filed a complaint against the police officers in question. The victim never denied that the police had pending warrants against him and his father. Yet, these warrants were for violations of the Highway Code and trading without a permit. In no way could these pending warrants --unknown to the police officers prior to the investigation of the suspects' record-- justify the zeal shown in the on-the-spot inspection and later in detention. This is even more surprising, since the investigation itself showed no evidence of the "dangerous" nature and intentions of the suspects. The latter accepted the improper behavior of the police officers as some kind of misunderstanding, so they tried to provide the police with adequate proofs and explanations.

#### **4. Follow-up on the case of Durgut Sezgin**

With the help of his father's lawyer, Athena Mavridou Panagopoulou, Durgut Sezgin got a certificate --once brought to the community authorities of the village Vena-- stating that he is not a Bulgarian citizen. The certificate was issued by the Bulgarian Consulate in Thessaloniki in 1995. Following contacts with the Ombudsman, the Police Directorate of Komotini (Western Thrace) and the Regional Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Thrace, the GHM urged Durgut Sezgin to make a second application to the police asking to be given documents proving his stateless person's status. To avoid confusions with the terminology, the GHM prepared the text of the application clearly distinguishing between a residence permit and a stateless person's document. Unlike the residence permit, the stateless person's document costs nothing and implies a direct obligation of the state to subsequently grant Greek citizenship to the person in question.

#### **5. Housing programs in Chalandri and Agia Paraskevi**

##### *Chalandri*

According to the latest registration data provided by Doctors of the World-Greece, there are approximately 42 Roma families in Chalandri. From time to time, this number reaches up to 52 families. Out of them, 26 are registered citizens of the municipality. Chalandri is a suburb of Athens with a relatively high standard of living. For the last 20 years Chalandri has been experiencing construction boom, which left the area with almost no free land. Precisely because of this scarcity, the very few remaining plots of land cost a fortune. Even for the municipal authorities, the acquisition of land for schools, gymnasiums and cultural centers has been an insurmountable problem.

In this light, it is hardly surprising that since May 1999 --when the first protocols of eviction were serviced-- there has been no progress in the case of the Roma. Even worse, following contacts with the Ombudsman' Office, the GHM was informed of the latest actions taken by the owners of the land where the camp is. The owners have submitted reports to the Ombudsman claiming their property. The GHM informed Mr. Freddy Stamos from the Prime Minister's Office for Quality of Life and Elpida Efthymiatis from Doctors of the World-Greece about these developments. The two non-governmental organizations, together with Herakles and Stelios Kalamiotis, from

the “Elpida” Association, had a meeting with Ms. Syrmopoulos from the municipal council at which they discussed possible alternative solutions. Ms. Syrmopoulos refused to discuss any possibility other than a housing program realized under the auspices of the prefecture authorities and the Office for Quality of Life. Only then, would the municipality think of contributing financially to the transferring of the Roma, either by allocating a certain amount of money or conducting some of the infrastructure works on the new site(s). Ms. Syrmopoulos promised that, provided a housing program was started, she would make efforts to ensure that the municipal council includes a relevant provision in the municipality’s plan of action and budget for the year 2000. She additionally argued that in her mind in reality, allocating a lump sum to every Roma family, as household compensation is not indicative of any integrationist attempts. Ms. Syrmopoulos also stated that the municipality lacks the necessary institutional framework to take over programs fighting social exclusion. However, she stated that relevant research on the matter had tried to show the need for some extra measures to be taken by the municipality in favor of certain groups, Roma included. Only in this way, would the municipal council have a legitimate basis to ask for more funds, dedicated to the Roma. The research, which had been conducted, showed that only a minimal percentage of the municipality’s population lives in the social margin and that social exclusion is not one of the major issues in Chalandri. That is why extra measures, programs and funds could not be justified.

The GHM and Doctors of the World-Greece tried to explain to Ms. Syrmopoulos that there was no time left for an ambitious housing program to be realized, even if the money and the authorities’ will could be taken for granted. Keeping in mind that the owners would shortly be vindicated by the Ombudsman’s Office and by the court, it is likely that Roma in Chalandri would soon be called to leave the camp without any alternative. Ms. Syrmopoulos’ answer was that the municipality was just a cog in the machine, which has redirected the question to the Prefecture authorities, the Office for Quality of Life and the competent ministries.

### *Agia Paraskevi*

In their meeting with the mayor of Agia Paraskevi, Mr. Gotsis, the GHM, Doctors of the World-Greece, Freddy Stamos from the Prime Minister’s Office for Quality of Life, Herakles Kalamiotis, Stelios Kalamiotis and Nikos Katsaris from the “Elpida” Association discussed possible housing programs for the Roma tent-dwellers in the region. Twelve to seventeen families have been living for some years on plots of land, which are partly owned by the municipality and partly by private landowners. The mayor made reference to the protocols of eviction already serviced to some of the Roma as well as the existing plans for the construction of a sports center in the area. The owners have every right to claim their property and no mayor could prevent them from doing this, stated Mr. Gotsis. The latter made also reference to the scarcity of free land in Agia Paraskevi, which --like in Chalandri-- costs a fortune. In any case, Mr. Gotsis was willing to provide each family with 3 million drs. as household compensation, which would be the municipality’s contribution to the state’s efforts to provide alternative housing solutions to those people.