

REPORT ON THE COVERAGE OF THE ROMA IN THE GREEK PRESS

APRIL 2000

(Comments in italics are made by the GHM)

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1. International Roma Day

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.

Text in Greek:

http://www.avgi.org/cgi-bin/hweb.exe?-A=136057&-w=ÈÏ ÈÍ ÙÍ ÊÊ~_20000407_&-V=AVGI

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 shacks 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.

Text in Greek:

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Both of these reports were very positive in their essence. They were the only reports with references to International Roma Day and the attention paid to Roma by international intergovernmental organizations.

2. Worldwide discrimination of Roma

9/04/2000: *To Vima*, p. A35

[From *The New York Times*, by Steven Erlander]

'Romas' Hard Times'

Also on the same issue:

4/04/2000: *Ta Nea*, p.53

‘‘Romas’ Time’’

In post-Communist Slovakia discrimination against Roma is certainly the rule and not the exception. This is true even when it concerns the Slovak police. In the evening on February 7, Tibor Tankos, his wife and their twelve-year-old son Thomas, were walking down the street when a car driven by a drunken man, ran into them. Thomas was the only one who survived from this accident in the town of Pablbtse Dad Oum, in Northeastern Slovakia.

The police failed to arrest the suspect, who was reportedly a man associated with the Mafia. Moreover, they also threatened and ill-treated the victims.

Tibor Tankos father stated in despair, ‘‘we, the Roma have no rights in this land.’’ Roma around the world are estimated to be around 8 mill. In their majority, they live in Eastern and Central Europe. Not only are they ignored in the post-Communist world, but they also face rejection from the western countries. As a rule, Romas’ requests for asylum are turned down - a fact that raises questions as to how the western world complies with the international legal standards. Kosovo Roma have been forced to leave their country. Approximately 100,000, out of 125,000, Roma abandoned their homes. The Albanians accused them of having collaborated with the Serbs.

There are substantial numbers of Roma in Romania and Hungary. Yet, just like in the other post-Communist countries, they are subject to multiple discrimination. The President of the Czech Republic, Vaslav Havel, once stated, ‘‘Roma are the litmus test for the existence of civil society and not for democracy.’’ If this still holds true, then the post-Communist world seems to have failed the test.

12/04/2000: *Avgi*, p.16

[from French *Liberation* (1-2/04/2000)]

‘‘British against Roma’’

In the last three weeks, most British newspapers, particularly *The Sun*, have launched an anti-immigrant campaign. *The Sun* --Britain’s largest selling newspaper, famous for its populist style-- is most probably the leader of the campaign. Yet, other papers such as *The Express*, *The Evening Saturday* and *The Daily Mail* keep feeding the British readers with articles on the alleged parasitic life and unlawful behavior of the immigrants. Roma are the first ones to be targeted in this. Accusations are mostly directed towards Roma women who maltreat their children, forcing them to beg in the streets. Even more, Roma, like most other immigrants and asylum seekers in the country, are said to abuse of the British welfare state system and spend tax payers’ money on Mafia gambling and other unproductive and illegal activities.

According to Judith Woodward, acting member of the ‘‘National Council against Racism,’’ British public opinion is not interested in the tragic lives these people run away from. Even if they come from Kosovo, having lost their homes and relatives, in

the eyes of the British citizens, they are just new intruders. In 1999, asylum seekers in Great Britain were estimated at 100,000, that is ten times more than in the last decade. Only 5-10% meet the necessary requirements to have their applications accepted after years of patience. Bureaucratic procedures can last anytime between a few months and a few years. Tony Blair's government has done nothing to reduce the tension. Anti-Roma inflammatory speech in the media precedes acts of police brutality against Roma in the streets of Scotland. Phase number two of the 'sweeping' operations were directed to the transportation of immigrant Roma to London and then to refugee centers, miles away from the city.

Barbara Ross, a minister in charge of migration issues, inaugurated a new center in Cambridge for asylum seekers. The Center is meant to provide the asylum seekers with the necessary accommodation, while they are waiting for the government's response to their application. The place is fenced and is situated miles away from the town. The new migration law will make the procedures for granting asylum much faster. The goal is for the refugees to spend the least possible time in Great Britain. After all, British politicians do not forget that immigration comes third on the list of tax payers' priorities after health and education.

All reports are positive, highlighting Romas' problems in Europe. As a rule, the Greek press tends to focus more on the international, rather than on the national dimension of discriminatory practices against Roma.

3. Following the parliamentary elections

11&12/4/00: *Eleftherotypia* [Y. Triandis], p. 63

The reporter makes sarcastic comments on the government's sudden interest in Roma. The Roma residents in districts with a very tight competition between the governing party and the opposition were lucky to acquire pre-fabricated houses originally destined for the Athens earthquake victims.

4. Roma tragedies

14/04/2000: *Eleftherotypia*, p. 61

“A Four-year-old Boy Falls from a Train”

A four-year-old Roma child died under unclarified circumstances while traveling with his father on a train from Athens to Istanbul. The child's absence was noticed by his father only when the train left the town of Larisa. The train stopped and moved back in search of the boy. The latter was found seriously injured and taken to the hospital. He passed away before he was rushed into the operation theater.

A neutral report with overtones of sympathy.

22/04/2000: *Avgi*, p. 32

‘‘Rena of the Traffic Lights’’

[25 Years Amnesty International-Greece]

[This is a report originally published in the tri-monthly paper of Amnesty International-Greece, based on a true story brought to light by ‘‘Team 17’’ in Heraklion (Crete)]

‘‘Twelve-year-old Rena is singing a song. Her lips are cracking and shivering from the freezing weather but she goes on singing.’’ This phrase --introduction to the ‘‘Team 17’’ report-- encapsulates Rena’s gloomy life story. A month ago, when Rena’s father was arrested after a police inspection for drugs in their camp, Rena had no other option but to work at the traffic lights. The police found no drugs in the camp but produced three pending warrants against Rena’s father. He was sentenced to six months and ten days and a fine of 300 ECU. Since he did not have the money for the fine --he did not have Greek drachmas, let alone ECU-- Rena’s father ended up in prison. The large family of eight children entirely depends on Rena, since her oldest brother has physical disabilities, while the second one is too old to beg in the streets. Rena is the next in line. The family lives in destitute under the poverty line, without electricity or heating. Mud and garbage are all around the makeshift plastic hut. It is dark and smelly. It is so dark that human rights are not visible there. Until a month ago, Rena used to attend the 36th elementary school, together with other Roma children. On December 10, she celebrated International Human Rights Day and enjoyed the party organized by Amnesty International dedicated to People’s Friendship, singing happily in Romanes about the rights of the child. At present, Rena sings her own story entitled ‘‘What non-Roma might know about love.’’

A very emotional story with much of sympathy for the heroine.

22/04/2000: *To Vima* [D. Galanis], p. A22-23

‘‘Les miserables’’

In an article dealing with groups that are socially marginalized, Roma are listed among the groups suffering from social exclusion. Together with the unemployed, the poor, the elderly, the drug addicts and the disabled people, Roma experience the rejection of the mainstream.

The number of Roma in Greece can be estimated approximately. Based on data from the Council of Europe, Roma in Greece exceed 120,000. Other sources estimate that they are somewhere between 200,000 and 300,000 people. Most of them live in the outskirts of towns, in abandoned and downgraded areas, with hardly any infrastructure. With the exception of Agia Varvara, most Roma settlements lack entertainment and shopping centers. Reactions from local residents, opposing Romas’ settling in their neighborhoods and the lack of housing policies, have very much impeded their quick and smooth integration into society. Roma were forced to live far from the rest of society, with the least amount of social interaction.

Romas' participation in cultural activities, associations, political movements and sports clubs remains low. Their social and financial situation was very much affected by the new physiognomy the national economy has taken; Roma were forced to abandon their old traditional professions and turn their eyes towards seasonal work in the fields, peddling and the provision of various services. Many of them still live on begging. Their illiteracy rate is extremely high (65%). Even more, drug dealing, alcohol consumption and depression are new problems added to the vicious circle of poverty, unemployment and illiteracy, reducing to the minimum their hopes and prospects for a better future.

A report, which highlights the reasons behind the social exclusion of the Roma.

5. Civic initiatives on Roma

23/04/2000: *Epohi*

[Panos Lambrou interviewing George Speliotes, spokesperson of the Committee for Human Rights in Messinia (Peloponese)], p. 16-17

“Racism in Messinia Has an Opponent”

Talking about the activities of the Committee for Human Rights in Messinia (Peloponese), George Speliotes refers to the organization's mobilization for Romas' emancipation and quality of life. There are approximately 2000 Roma living in Messinia, mainly concentrated in two areas: the industrial zone and the city of Kalamata (“Agia Triada” area). The organization fought for them to acquire dustbins and water and made concrete proposals for their permanent relocation. A member of the organization is the head of the local educational program on Roma run by the General Secretariat of Popular Training.

A very positive report, which highlights the importance and impact of civic initiatives.