

«The Greek Ombudsman's Roma Intervention»

Speech delivered at the

The European Parliament Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs
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The Greek Ombudsman has been examining cases pertaining to issues which concern the Roma communities since the beginning of its operation. However, since the Ombudsman was designated as the Equality Body in the year 2005, the Authority has more systematically attempted to, both, ascertain and record the range and the substance of the problems encountered by the Roma population in Greece and, propose to the state courses of action necessary to lead to the full participation of the Roma people in Greek society. We have been doing this mainly by examining individual cases, performing on-site investigations and issuing special reports in addition to our yearly report to the parliament. Therefore, based on our experience, I would like to make the following points:

◆ Even though all EU states share the same principles for equal treatment of vulnerable groups, such as the Roma, and are aware of successful practices which may lead to their social integration, there exist major differences among the EU states in terms of the actual integration of the Roma. Perhaps the real life circumstances in each state (not only economic but also historical, cultural and political) have led to different standards of living and to different degrees of integration of the Roma in each of them.

Therefore, the EU Strategy on Roma inclusion must be wide enough to allow for development from different levels, but simultaneously, it must be austere enough not to allow for inaction and sustenance of the status quo in any given EU state.

◆ In my country, I can surely say, that there have been, in the past (e.g. in the 70's) and now, genuine efforts to achieve the goal of Roma social inclusion. However, the complexity of the issue in conjunction with the absence of sustained – over long periods of time- interest in developing appropriate policies, together with lack of analogous to the needs planning and allocation of funds, has resulted in limited only, accidental I would argue, success, and this only in some of the aspects of the problem (e.g. housing).

◆ Specifically in Greece the situation of the Roma population is not homogeneous. There are Roma who are fully integrated and there are Roma who live in conditions of total exclusion. In general terms I would say that the standard of living of the Greek Roma is by far better than that of the immigrant Roma population that arrived in the country in the last 10-15 years.

However, the unsuitable conditions in which large number of Roma live in conjunction with the unacceptable, for the most part, life sustaining activities in which the Roma engage, ensue severe negative consequences for the whole community where the camps are established. Consequently, in principle, it must be of no concern the citizenship of the individuals who live under these unacceptable conditions. This argument should be re-enforced by the fact that, on the one hand, there is a tendency for intermarriage between the two Roma communities, and on the other there is a sizeable number of undocumented persons amongst them, so it is difficult to determine who is of Greek descent and who isn't. Nevertheless the main policies

implemented in the last decades in Greece (e.g. housing programmes) were directed towards Greek citizens only.

Therefore, irrespective of the degree of their legal responsibility, EU states must care for both their nationals and their immigrant Roma population.

Having said that, I must point out the differences in the situation and the life planning opportunities that, we have observed, exist between these two major groups, in all four main aspects of social life, that is: a) housing, b) education, c) employment and d) social services/benefits.

a) Housing

-The Greek Roma who reside legally in areas of large cities, such as Larissa, do not differ from Greek non Roma citizens. The problem they are facing is in finding lands for the expansion of their communities. Regarding this, it could be argued, that the inaction or negative action of local administration could be construed as indirect discrimination.

-The Greek Roma who reside in large communities and have established their own urban habitat arbitrarily, are facing the problem of *legalizing their establishments in terms of both: of the land property, if they do not legally own it, or of their home as such, in case it was build without a permit or it does not fulfill urban building standards*. Roma living in such villages (e.g. Drosero-Xanthi), while awaiting for years for their locale to become part of the city planning area, they encounter a plethora of problems. These problems have to do with the existence of infrastructures for water supply and sewerage removal, infrastructure for the supply of electricity, garbage removal and bus connection with the rest of the city, building and operation of schools, kindergartens and health and social services facilities. Consequently all aspects of the life of the inhabitants in these villages are linked to the existence or not of these facilities. The inclusion, legally, of these villages into the relevant city planning design will allow for the proper planning and the creation of all the aforementioned facilities.

-A large number of Greek Roma reside in illegally established camps. There they live in dwellings made by themselves out of materials such as plastic, pieces of wooden panels, glass, fibreglass, etc. Needless to say these dwellings do not offer them protection from the elements of nature and often constitute a direct threat to their life. These camps most often do not have running water, electricity, toilets, or any facility necessary for dignified human living.

The vast majority of immigrants Roma reside in these illegally established camps (e.g. Votanikos) under deplorable conditions. The creation of appropriate campsites, where basic facilities (for water supply, electricity, toilets, garbage removal, and access to schools) are available to the inhabitants is of the utmost importance.

Local administrations are not only by law required to create appropriate campsites for the Roma who are on the move for subsistence reasons. They could also be instrumental in planning and in construction of such camps, or, more importantly, in finding alternative to camps solutions to the problem of homelessness. Furthermore local administrations could advance any type of request made for the improvement of the life of the people in the camps and implement any decision pertaining to that. Thus, local authorities must be held responsible for both inaction to resolve problems

(chronic or temporary) or for instigating indirect discrimination and hostilities amongst the members of the local community.

b) Education

-The education pattern of Roma children, and more rarely of adult Roma education, follows the above mentioned pattern of disarray. Where a community is well established the children go to school, albeit with an, often, large number of drop-outs. Where the community is living under inhumane conditions the children do not participate in the educational procedure.

Despite the fact that the state has taken some positive steps in order to maintain student enrolment and sustain school attendance by the Roma children (such as offering a monetary benefit for the enrolment of Roma children to school, of permitting the enrolment of students without documents, of having adopted the “card of travelling student”, preparatory classes, etc.), the inclusion of Roma children to the educational procedure is not a goal that can be argued that it has, even remotely, being met. Considering that education is the main means to bring about the end of social exclusion of vulnerable groups and thus for the improvement of their life opportunities, I believe that great emphasis should be given to it so that the inclusion and participation of Roma children in education becomes a reality. Since access to the right of education is the impetus for access to other rights there can be no effort/measures/mechanisms that can be spared to bring this about.

Measures which will ensure the school participation of Roma children must immediately been adopted and penalties should be imposed to states who do not make a concerted effort to alleviate the problem of Roma illiteracy.

There must be no distinction between Greek Roma and immigrant Roma children as far as inclusion to the educational procedure is concerned. Parents, as well as school and local administration officials, should be held responsible in case of failure to do whatever is humanly possible in order to ensure that all Roma children exercise their right to education.

c) Employment

While in recent times educated Roma have had access to professions (medical, mechanical, law, etc.) the vast majority of uneducated Roma people are self employed (or unemployed). They usually engage in trade (e.g. selling carpets, agricultural goods in local markets, operate small businesses). Others gather and sell used iron or other metal parts.

Given the interest of the Roma in being or becoming self reliant rather than taking part in becoming employees, the state must take this into account when it adopts policies intended to increase Roma participation in the labour market. Special care should be given to the employment of Roma women. However, whatever policies are adopted, they should all involve responsibility and accountability from the part of the Roma, so as to avoid maintaining a pattern of “charity” which would sustain their victimization. Here I should mention the subsidised programs of OAED (State Employment Agency) in starting new businesses directed towards Roma, as well as similar training programs which, however, must be linked to finding a secure job. (These programs –problematically implemented- were intended for Greek Roma).

In the workplace there is no distinction between Greek and immigrant Roma as far as protection and working conditions are concerned. Furthermore, I should

point out that Roma also work in informal labour markets and thus have undeclared income. The offering of incentives for the passage from informal to formal labour market would surely be a positive measure. Efforts also should be made for the protection of Roma from organized crime organizations which may utilize their real economic and employment weakness to further their own interests, to the detriment of the society as a whole.

d) Health and social benefits coverage

- In Greece in case of an emergency, or of an instance where there is a threat to life, everybody has access to hospital services, regardless of their employment or residence status.

- Greek Roma citizens often lack access to primary state health services because they lack the necessary documents which will enable them to have such access (e.g. lack social insurance coverage). If they are not documented they have no access to social benefits to which they are entitled. Greek citizens who have income below the threshold of the 3000 euro per annum are entitled to basic health coverage and social benefits/welfare.

It is absolutely necessary for the state to take the necessary action in order to ensure that the phenomenon of undocumented persons (Greek or immigrant) is eradicated, since it affects all aspects in an individual's life. The GO has submitted a relevant proposal (Special Report) to the competent services for the eradication of this problem.

Lastly, as a good practice, our experience shows that the establishment and operation of socio-medical centres, in areas where large number of Roma resides, have had very positive results. These centres act as an in-between medium between the Roma communities and the larger society. Thus, their operation should be sustained and improved so that they would be able to accommodate the demands and fulfil the needs of the community.