

Statement

MEP Lívia Járóka

To: European Committee of Social Rights

Re: ERRC Collective Complaint versus Greece

Honourable Committee Members,

I herewith submit a statement and supplementary materials for review by the European Committee of Social Rights in the matter of the European Roma Rights Center Collective Complaint versus Greece. As detailed below, I have both expertise and interest in the housing situation of Roma in Greece. I believe my contribution to these proceedings to be valuable and ask that the remarks here be considered with all due weight.

I have been aware of the situation of Roma in Greece since 2000, when I attended a conference in Athens and was graciously provided with a tour of Romani settlements by a lady who worked for a local NGO. This experience was a great shock. As a Romani woman from Hungary, I had hitherto understood (incorrectly as it turned out), that the "Roma issue" was a matter for poor eastern European countries. I had assumed that as a long-standing member of both the European Union and the Council of Europe, the situation of Roma in Greece would be significantly better than in Hungary, my country of origin. This turned out not to be the case at all: the conditions that I saw in Romani settlements in Greece during this first visit were among the worst I had seen anywhere.

In April of this year, I was elected Member of the European Parliament. One of my first actions following my election was to return to Greece to see if, in the intervening years since my first visit there, the material conditions of the Romani community in Greece had changed in any meaningful way. I am sorry to report that, during a July 2004 visit to a number of Romani communities in the greater Athens area, I found that little had changed since my first visit, four years ago.

We first visited the "model" community in Spata. This was the only settlement we visited in which any infrastructure development was in evidence at all. Spata is a community of several hundred Roma who were moved from a site at a crossroads near central Spata to a location on a remote hill 5 kilometres away from anywhere. We drove along a dusty, pot-holed gravel path, reportedly mud in bad weather, through a series of orchards, then turned left up a hill and continued until we came to the settlement. The Roma were promised that if they moved there they would have prefab housing and infrastructure. The prefab housing looked decent, but water is brought in giant cisterns and notably, despite the fact that the high-tension line goes right overhead, there is no electricity. Liquid waste was running out of the ground onto the road. There is now a school bus to take children to school, but for three years there apparently wasn't one. There is a small structure that is apparently for common use including medical care, but it is full of piles of junk. It is hard to know what medical care one could provide with no electricity. Also, according to Panayote Dimitras of the NGO Greek Helsinki Monitor, there are supposed to be two such structures. However, the second one is nowhere in sight. Despite being a fully segregated, substandard ghetto with only a very tenuous connection at all to the rest of

Spata, the Spata settlement was paradise compared to the other settlements that we visited.

In Aspropyrgos, also on the outskirts of Athens, but at the other end of the city, we first went to a settlement known locally as "Psari", just next to the Attica highway. Our visit to Psari was truly shocking. Many hundreds of people have been living in the open for apparently more than ten years. The children do not go to school, we were told by local Roma, as "The non-Roma would never let us go there". All of the children are illiterate and the parents are very angry about it. There were rats, lice and fleas in abundance. Local Roma told us that they get water by stealing it in town and that they are chased off if caught. Children were playing in open raw sewage. There were no toilets. A man with a visible rat bite said that the local hospital refused to treat him. We were told that the first ever visit by authorities to the settlement had been two weeks previously when some people came and administered vaccinations. There was garbage strewn in huge piles along the road approaching the settlement and everywhere inside the settlement. There has never once been a garbage collection in the settlement. I have never seen conditions this extreme anywhere.

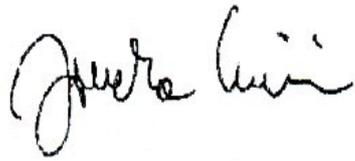
We then went to three other settlements in Aspropyrgos, all of which apparently go under the name "Nea Zoe", which means "New Life" in Greek. These were similarly awful to the "Psari" settlement. In Nea Zoe 1, no one was at home at a series of heartbreaking structures which look like houses but are made of cardboard and scrap and more-or-less rise out of huge piles of garbage. We were told that the people who live there were out begging, and that some are from Albania. These people are also totally excluded from all municipal infrastructure. Nea Zoe 2 was located on a mud flat up the hill from Nea Zoe 1. There were a few people around, and filth everywhere. The settlement is on a huge open mud flat. The sanitary conditions there are also not fit for human habitation. We saw one child in a cast, which was the only indication that these people have ever been in contact with a public service. In Nea Zoe 3, we saw more filth, squalor, exclusion and life-threatening housing. The electricity in the shanties there is stolen from a local power line. The water main is a hose fastened to a wall under the settlement. None of the children were in school, we were told. The Roma in Nea Zoe 3 make a living by picking through the local garbage dump, and pile the rest of this next to the huts they live in. I had previously understood that European social policy was proud of having ended hunger in Europe, but in Nea Zoe the situation did not appear to be like that. I was told that there are as many as six similar settlements in Aspropyrgos to the four we visited.

I was both saddened and angered by my visits to Romani settlements in Greece and am hopeful and positive that the situation will improve. As an MEP, I will facilitate this process by encouraging constructive dialogue between Greek MEPs, the Greek government and both national and international civil society organizations, in particular the European Roma Rights Center and the Greek Helsinki Monitor. I encourage the new government to acknowledge the problems that it has inherited and work swiftly to effectively redress the situation. I submit my statement in the hope that Greece, a long-standing Member of the European Union and of the Council of Europe, will now provide basic dignity to its Romani population.

I very much hope my views on this matter are taken into account by the Committee. I am appending herewith some photographs taken by my colleagues during our visits in

Romani settlements in Greece in July 2004. I think they will provide you with some sense of the conditions we met there.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Livia Jároka', written in a cursive style.

Lívia Jároka
Member
European Parliament