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CoE finds racism in Greece

Report notes race and religious discrimination against minorities, but also progress

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Minorities in Greece are subjected to racism, discrimination and intolerance by society, despite recent positive developments taken by the State to combat racism.

This was the main finding of a 12-page report released yesterday by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), the Council of Europe's expert body on combating racism. The report on Greece was among a total of five reports released by the commission examining racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and intolerance in countries such as France, Norway, Poland and Slovakia.

Although the ECRI recognizes that in all five countries positive developments have occurred since its last visit, the report also details the commission's continuing grounds for concern. In the case of Greece, ECRI notes that "problems of racism, intolerance, discrimination and exclusion affect particularly the Roma/Gypsy population, Albanians and other immigrants, as well as members of the Muslim minority." The commission underlines that "these problems are connected to the generally low level of recognition within Greek society of its multicultural reality, an acknowledgement which is all the more urgent given the new patterns of migration to Greece in recent years."

ECRI reporters visited Greece on October 19-21, 1999, when they also met with representatives of various ministries and public administrations responsible for issues relating to the ECRI's mandate.

In its report, ECRI acknowledges that Greece has implemented a number of its proposals that were filed with its last report, including the ratification in 1997 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and its first Optional Protocol, the enactment of criminal law provisions aimed at combating racism and intolerance, the establishment of an Ombudsman's Office for Citizen's Rights in 1997, as well as the establishment in 1998 of National Human Rights Committee com-



A group of Gypsy friends standing outside a makeshift camp in the suburb of Ano Liosia, northwest of Athens. According to a report by the European Commission, Roma, or Gypsies, who live in large numbers in camps around Attica, have been subjected to widespread discrimination.

prising government officials, representatives of nongovernmental organizations, trade unions, political parties, scholars and Supreme Court justices.

At the same time, ECRI charges that certain "vulnerable groups" such as religious groups, Jewish communities and "Macedonians," "may be particularly vulnerable to problems of racism, discrimination and intolerance."

Reporting on the current situation in the Jewish communities, the ECRI notes that "although there are no reports of problems in the exercise of freedom by the Jewish communities in Greece, anti-Semitic material often appears in the extreme right-wing media." In regard to "Macedonians," the "Greek citizens wishing to express and promote their ethnic Macedonian identity," ECRI notes that, in July 1998, the European Court of Human Rights found Greece in violation of the right to freedom of association, based on its refusal to register an association aimed at promoting "Macedonian" culture. The commission declares in the report that there are "cases where the right to freedom of expression of this group has not been respected."

Having repeatedly noted in several pages of the report the transition of Greece to a new reality of a

"multicultural society," the commission devoted a separate section to address the issues of racism, discrimination and intolerance against specific minority groups such as the Roma/Gypsies, Albanians and the Muslim minority in western Thrace.

"As noted by ECRI in its first report, the Roma/Gypsy population of Greece is particularly vulnerable to disadvantage, exclusion and discrimination in many fields," the commission says.

Estimated by the state to number between 150,000 and 200,000, almost half of the Roma/Gypsies are permanently settled in the Athens area, while a large number moves around the country.

ECRI reports that "some municipal authorities have expelled communities of Roma/Gypsies from their permanent camps... without providing alternative accommodation," and they are "excluded from many normal citizenship rights and benefits."

Albanian immigrants, making up about half of the immigrant population of Greece — no precise figures are available since a large number are illegal — are subjected to prejudice and intolerant attitudes, the commission notes.

"ECRI is concerned at the significant amount of anti-foreigner

sentiment directed particularly, although not exclusively, toward Albanians," the commission says, while noting that "the migration flows between Albania and Greece during the 1990s have been matched by manifestations of hostility and fear within Greek public opinion."

As concerns the Muslim minority in western Thrace, the commission stressed that "although positive steps have been taken by the Greek government... there is still room for further improvement." ECRI declares that "Muslims of western Thrace experience some restrictions of their freedom of expression," such as the right to call themselves "Turks," and restrictions concerning "the administration of private charitable foundations used to support education, social welfare and minority activities." The commission, however, also acknowledges and is "pleased to note that the Greek authorities have recently accepted a number of Turkish-language schoolbooks for the use of Muslim students in Thrace," and other developments such as the intention to "gradually introduce Turkish-language classes and the teaching of the Koran in pilot secondary public schools." The report, which is the second on Greece and aims at examining the implementation of proposals made to the government in the previous report, covers the situation as of December 10, 1999, meaning that any development subsequent to this date is not covered in the analysis, conclusions or proposals.

These problems derive from the generally low level of recognition within Greek society of its multicultural reality'

Greek force leaves Albania

Angered by Tirana's delay in extending stay, Athens brings troops home

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Athens has recalled the Greek military force in Albania (known by its acronym ELDAL) following excessive demands by the Tirana government concerning the terms and conditions under which the force would extend a stay that began in the spring of 1997, following Albania's collapse into chaos.

The force of about 200 men will leave Albania in the next few weeks, leaving behind 30 officers who will continue to train Albanian troops. Some of the others will join the Greek force in Kosovo, without the overall number of troops in the NATO-occupied Serb province being boosted.

Also, the number of Greek troops helping keep the peace in Bosnia-Herzegovina will

soon be reduced, in a cost-cutting measure. Defense Minister Akis Tsochadzopoulos said yesterday that the mission of the Greek force in Albania had been accomplished and was successful in helping establish stability in Albania. But the Greek government is angry with the position taken by the Albanian government, which, citing a series of procedural problems, held up for months the Cabinet's extension of ELDAL's stay. This prevented the issue from reaching the country's Parliament. Twenty days ago, the Albanian government demanded that Greece rephrase the agreement for the force's stay, in an effort to secure terms which the Greek side did not agree to — to the extent that it decided to withdraw the force. Tsochadzopoulos and Foreign Minister George Papandreou announced this decision in letters to their Albanian counterparts. The terms

with which Athens disagreed were not made known. The Greek government is especially upset with the Albanian side because it has spent tens of billions of drachmas to help Albania get back on its feet, far more than was spent by the Turkish force, whose stay in the country has continued without hindrance. An Italian military force also remains.

Greek funds were used to repair Tirana's hospital and to set up four bases and refugee camps. The hospital in Gjirokaster is still being repaired and soon infrastructure projects at the port of Durres, worth 2 billion drachmas, will be tendered. In addition, large amounts of money were spent on restructuring the Albanian army. Albanian military helicopters and airplanes were repaired at Greek expense, and, in cooperation with the Albanian authorities, the Greek force helped combat crime.