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European Court again chides Greece over discrimination against Roma schoolchildren

The Greek authorities must immediately stop segregating Romani schoolchildren from their peers, Amnesty International urged today after the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the practice in a local school district in central Greece amounted to discrimination.

In a unanimous ruling today in *Lavida and Others v. Greece*, the European Court found that “the continuing nature of this situation and the State’s refusal to take anti-segregation measures implied discrimination and a breach of the right to education”.

It is the sixth European Court ruling on discrimination against Roma pupils, and the third involving Greek schools.

“It’s shameful that, despite three separate European Court rulings now, Greece has failed to change its ongoing discrimination against Romani schoolchildren and the flagrant violation of their right to education,” said Jezerca Tigani, Deputy Europe and Central Asia Director at Amnesty International.

The latest case was brought by a national NGO, the Greek Helsinki Monitor (GHM) on behalf of 23 Romani schoolchildren from the town of Sofades, in the central Greek region of Thessaly.

There are almost 400 Roma families in Sofades – half the town’s population – nearly all of whom live in two areas known as the old and new Roma housing estates.

One of Sofades’ four primary schools – school number 4 – was built on the old Roma estate, meaning it catered almost exclusively to the Romani schoolchildren living on the estate. Despite living closer to a different school, residents of the new Roma estate were within the catchment area for school number 4, according to local authorities.

After a visit to Sofades in 2009, a GHM delegation sent two letters to the Ministry of Education, pointing out “a clear ethnic segregation, which violates both Greek law and international human rights norms” including the European Convention on Human Rights. No reply was received to either.

The European Court noted that a report sent to the Regional Education Department drew attention to the situation and recommended that the authorities avoid placing Roma children in schools attended exclusively by other Roma, in order to end social exclusion and promote integration.

The report had suggested building new schools and re-drawing the school catchment map. And it also noted that Sofades municipal authorities had refused to close down school no. 4, as well as the hostile reactions of the parents of non-Roma pupils when Roma children were enrolled in the town’s other schools.

The European Court ordered the Greek authorities to pay each of the 23 complainants in the Lavida case €3,000 for damages and expenses.

Twice before – in rulings in the cases of Sampanis and others v. Greece in June 2008 and Sampani and others v. Greece in December 2012 – the Court has censured the Greek authorities for allowing discrimination against Roma pupils in a school in Aspropirgos, a western suburb of Athens.

"This being the third judgment for discriminatory access to education of Romani children it indicates that the government has no intention to desegregate such schools as long as local authorities are opposed to such moves," said Panayote Dimitras, spokesperson of the Greek Helsinki Monitor.

Amnesty International noted that Roma children face segregation or exclusion from schools in many other parts of Greece such as Thrace, Psahna Evias and Spata.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has recently expressed concerns about the limited access to education and school segregation experienced by Roma pupils in Greece, and Greek civil society organisations have documented several cases of persistent segregation and exclusion of Roma pupils in different parts of the country.

"This situation demonstrates that EU standards on discrimination on grounds of race and ethnic origin are not being adequately implemented in Greece, in education as well as many other areas of life," said Tigani.

Roma people face exclusion and disadvantage in education across the European Union.

A recent survey by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights and the United Nations Development Programme shows that in some EU countries – such as France, Italy, Portugal, Slovakia and Spain – young Roma aged 20-24 are up to two or three times less likely to have completed general upper-secondary education or vocational education as their non-Roma counterparts from the same age group.

The European Court has found that Roma children were discriminated against in schools in other European countries including Hungary, the Czech Republic and Croatia. But despite these judgments, the discrimination continues and Roma pupils are still enrolled in schools and classes for pupils with "mild mental disability" and in Roma-only segregated schools and classes where they follow reduced curricula.

"In many cases governments across the region are failing to take action to end this shameful practice that has no place in 21st century Europe," said Tigani.

"EU institutions must use all the political and legal measures in their power against countries that fail to effectively implement the Race Equality Directive which prohibits discrimination on grounds of ethnic origin in many areas including education."