

PRESS RELEASE

18 March 2002

TOPIC: COMMENTS ON US DEPARTMENT OF STATE REPORT ON GREECE

Greek Helsinki Monitor (GHM) and **Minority Rights Group-Greece (MRG-G)** would like to offer the following comments on the “*Report on Human Rights Practices – 2001: Greece*” by the **Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor** of the **US Department of State** (see <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2001/eur/8261.htm>), released on March 4, 2002.

1. The report follows the recent trend to cover as many areas of concern as possible and includes a lot of information that the vast majority of Greeks ignore since it has never been reported by (almost) all Greek media. The effort of Greek media to present it as “an improvement over last year” or as a report stressing “Greece’s generally good record,” when the same media had attacked viciously similar reports in past years that included less information on human rights violations in Greece simply reflects how, on “national issues,” Greek media adopt a state-inspired editorial line.
2. When compared with the report on other Balkan countries, it is noteworthy though that it covers less extensively areas like state authorities’ abuse of Roma rights or police brutality. The absence of any reference to the killing in downtown Athens of an Albanian citizen during a police control, when a similar incident with a Rom as victim, a month before in an Athens suburb, is mentioned is indicative: both events were widely covered by Greek media, which were very critical of police attitude. Likewise, the beating of one Rom by police is mentioned but the subsequent and more severe beating of five Rom in detention –both incidents were denounced by GHM, MRG-G, OMCT and Amnesty International- was not reported. At the same time, a similar milder incident of abuse from 1999 (erroneously mentioned as having happened in 2000) is still mentioned.
3. The report would have benefited from references to criticism on human rights issues by the Ombudsman, the National Human Rights Commission (EEDA) and intergovernmental expert bodies, which certainly carries more weight than NGO criticism on the same issues.

Internet Addresses: Balkan Human Rights Web Pages: <http://www.greekhelsinki.gr>

The Balkan Human Rights List: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/balkanhr>

The Greek Human Rights List: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/greekhr>

Center of Documentation and Information on Minorities in Europe – Southeast Europe: <http://www.cedime.net>

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Affiliation to International Organizations: Consortium of Minority Resources (COMIR), Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN), European Roma Rights Center (ERRC), International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX), International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (IHF), Minority Rights Group International (MRGI), One World Net, South East Europe Media Organisation (SEEMO), World Organization Against Torture (OMCT).

4. On religious freedom issues, very significant developments in 2001 are missing: the first in recent years trial for proselytism (of Pentecostals); the Supreme Court's second overturning of a conviction for operation of a Buddhist center; and EEDA's recommendation to abolish the relevant anachronistic laws.
5. The report has a series of factual inaccuracies that can only hurt its credibility: the policeman who killed a Rom was never jailed; the court decision on the policeman who ill-treated two Roma youth is reported incorrectly; there was no European Court on Human Rights decision on Greece in August, while a precious decision referred to did not concern opening of mail but ill-treatment; it is inaccurate that NGOs could visit prisons as GHM was refused access; the Aromanian convicted is a man and not a woman; it is inaccurate that "no refugees were deported to countries where they credibly feared prosecution" as many Turks were sent back to Turkey where they had been victims of and ran the risk of renewed torture; the figure for legalized Albanians is a vast exaggeration.
6. The most serious flaw, though, is the treatment of Macedonians, in a way that gives the impression the State Department (DOS) wants to conform with what may be bearable to Greek authorities. Macedonians do not speak a Slavic dialect, as mentioned in the report, but the Macedonian language, as it is known and respected internationally; use of the Slavic term in fact shows bias in favor of Greece; worse, saying that Macedonians complain that "the government discourages them to use their dialect" is a distortion of what they say, as they never use the term dialect for their language. The report also mentions government concerns about "separatist aspirations of some Macedonian activists." It does not mention though the repeated denials of such allegations by all activists. In fact, as there has never been even one such statement, the mere mention in the report of the Greek government's defamatory allegation cannot but do service to the government. Such impression is strengthened by the absence of any reference to the case of the non-registration of the Home of Macedonian Civilization (and of the Rousali association), in both the 2000 and the 2001 reports, although references to similar problems of Turkish associations are reported. In the 2000 report, it was even mentioned that "complaints of government harassment had ceased in 2000" ... All that despite the fact that GHM and MRG-G had organized a special briefing of the US DOS delegation to the OSCE meeting in Warsaw in 2000 with the participation of Macedonian activists present in that meeting; and that all related documentation on the non-registration is available in the GHM and MRG-G website, and was given to DOS in mid-2001. DOS' attitude towards Macedonians in Greece, as reflected in the annual reports, cannot therefore be considered an oversight, or a result of lack of information; on the contrary it is a sustained and deliberate policy of complacency towards Greek authorities on the most sensitive human rights issue in Greece. Such complacency is not shown towards Bulgarian authorities that have a similar sensitivity for Macedonians, whose problems are mentioned in the relevant chapter.